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15
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

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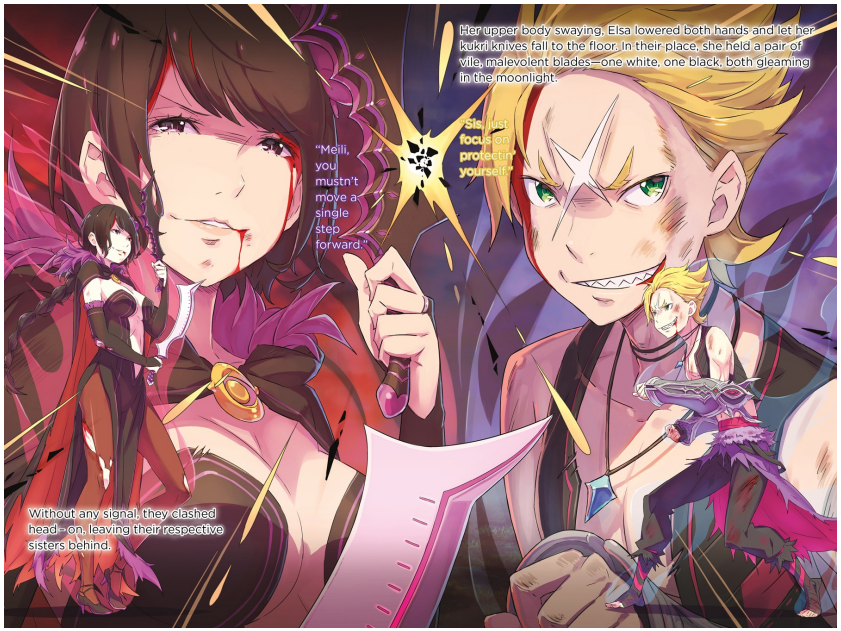
The Unknowable Present
An Impossible Dream


"Meili, you mustn't move a single step forward."
Her upper body swaying, Elsa lowered both hands and let her kukri knives fall to the floor. In their place, she held a pair of vile, malevolent blades—one white, one black, both gleaming in the moonlight.
"Sis, just focus on protecting yourself."
Without any signal, they clashed head-on, leaving their respective sisters behind.

Seeing Subaru's excited reaction made Beatrice proudly puff out her chest.
She took pride in the magic her mother had taught her, the magic she had worked so hard to master.
"I shall demonstrate the mastery of the Dark element and show you that the power of Dark magic is the greatest this world has to offer."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 15

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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CHAPTER 1

THE FINAL DAY OF ROSWAAL MANOR

1

—Even now, recalling that moment, she found herself stricken with regret.

The fingers she had extended were brushed away, even as she lovingly called out the girl's name.

The girl's parting words were caring. There was happiness, as well as determination, in those tearful eyes of hers; seeing that, her voice died in her throat.

Even now, she couldn't remember what went through her mind back then.

Even now, she didn't know what she should have said.

Even now, she had no answer to the question *What should I have done differently?*

—That was why, even now, she was alone, cowering in the archive of forbidden books, unable to leave.

"…Ryuzu."

The fragment of an old memory from the far reaches of her mind made that word spill from her lips.

She had spent those empty and stagnant months and years the same way, averting her eyes from that painful past.

Why now, of all times, had she remembered that regret, that memory, that girl's name?

The most likely explanation was her premonition.

A premonition that was much like how she had been refused long ago—

I'm getting you out of here, Beatrice—This time, my hand's gonna lead you right out under the big ol' sun, and we'll play around until that dress is totally black from mud.

—though this time, it was her turn to brush aside the offered hand.

2

The battle only continued to grow fiercer. The refined solace of the mansion was utterly shattered by the destructive powers at work.

"—Oaaaaaah!!"

In the wake of a roar, steel met steel. A dance of sparks punctuated the ringing echo.

Moonlight beamed into Roswaal Manor, the stage where the waltz was reaching its climax.

"—Marvelous. You are truly marvelous. Just stunning."

One impact shattered a window. Another cracked the floor. The aftershocks shredded a painting on the wall. The sultry voice that reached the ears of the ferocious golden beast seemed utterly amused by the mortal combat that was unfolding.

"I ain't happy hearing praise from anyone but Ram!!"

Blotting out the lovely voice with an angry cry, Garfiel threw his mighty fist, which sailed over the head of his foe and punched through the wall behind her. The woman tried to use the opportunity to slip into his blind spot until he came at her again with a lethal follow-up.

His arm ripped through the wall he had punched clean through, bringing a whole chunk of it with him.

"Ah…!"

Seeing the incoming attack boasting a surface area a hundred times larger than a fist, the woman—Elsa—let out an aroused sigh of admiration.

The next instant was so crucial to the outcome of this battle that even blinking would have been fatal.

As Garfiel's attack lacked any openings, much like the wall he was wielding, instead of trying to fall back, Elsa opted to press forward. With superhuman agility, she minimized the damage she sustained as her black blade flitted toward his neck.

A blow with the force of a gale sent Elsa flying back. However,

she was certain that in the exchange, her blade had reached—

"Marvelous."

"Praase frmm you dnnt mke me hppy, dmmnit!"

Elsa murmured in wonder as she remained crouched, one hand on the floor. It took only one look to realize that Garfiel had caught her kukri with his fangs. He shattered the arrested blade with one bite and spat out what was left.

—From the first exchange, he knew this woman was someone he couldn't afford to be careless with.

Faced with an opponent so powerful that normal methods were useless, Garfiel glanced over his shoulder and behind him. There, standing stiffly while observing the clash between the pair, was a woman with jade eyes—Frederica.

"Hey, Sis. What are ya doin', just starin' at me like that?"

"Eh? Ah, well, I had not intended on…"

"Sorry, but it really don't look like I'm gonna have time to show off. The general put me in charge of keepin' you safe, so please."

Garfiel chomped his fangs as he called to his hesitant sister. However, Frederica's reactions were dull, and her legs remained motionless, though it was no fault of hers.

The battle between Garfiel and Elsa had reached a level that left Frederica unable to intervene. Assistance was out of the question; simply moving required courage. That being the case—

"It's time to show what a good little brother I am!"

"Garf?!"

Seeing Frederica hadn't moved, Garfiel decided to act first.

When he ferociously leaped toward his foe, Elsa smiled charmingly, already knowing what he intended to do.

"Thinking of your sister at a time like this? What a kind boy."

As she spoke, the killer parried a bestial claw with her knife and leaped backward, clearing a great distance. Garfiel followed after her, shifting the battlefield to somewhere deeper in the mansion. This cleared the path to the Sleeping Princess—Rem.

If Frederica took Rem with her and left while her brother kept the enemy occupied, then there was nothing to fear.

"Garf!"

As he rained a flurry of punches, a clear, unwavering voice called out to him from behind. There was no time to look back, but his sister had only one thing to say to her little brother, whose back had grown far wider than the one in her memories—

“I believe in you!”

It was a reunion of mere minutes after ten years apart. But it was enough.

She trusted in her little brother’s strength, and he was determined to live up to his older sister’s expectations—that was all they needed.

“Damn right you do!!!”

His strength surged as a fire roared to life in his belly.

Elsa twisted her body to dodge a swing of his bestial claws, but she was too slow. Garfiel snagged her black braid and slammed her into a wall before proceeding to race down the corridor with her.

“Ooooaaaaahhh!!!”

Roaring, Garfiel charged straight into the mansion, with Elsa still pinned against the wall. Dust and debris flew from the wall as it broke, leaving her unable to resist the heavy impacts. All he had to do now was snap her neck, cave in her skull, and grind her against the wall until she was reduced to paste. Then he’d regroup with his friends and—

“Letting your mind wander in the middle of our dance? What a naughty boy.”

Faster than his mind could think, he miraculously flinched away out of sheer instinct.

A moment later, what should’ve been a direct hit grazed his left ear instead. Now off-balance, Garfiel completely lost his footing—in fact, the floor itself was missing. He fell right through the gaping hole that Elsa’s swing had produced.

The slicing attacks kept coming even as he entered a free fall. Garfiel relied purely on intuition to deflect them with the shields strapped to both his arms—defense, defense, defense. Ultimately, he couldn’t intercept every strike. Blood flowed freely from fresh wounds that appeared all over him.

The moment he made contact with the floor below, Garfiel rolled away to escape the zone of death. He rose from the carpet on all fours while glaring straight ahead. A white cloud of dust parted to reveal his opponent, as though she stood atop a moonlit stage.

The beautiful assassin smiled, gripping her kukri with both hands. Her upper body was smeared with blood.

“…Looks like Sis is on her way. The rest is up to the general.”

Sensing the presence still on the floor above had already set off, Garfiel sighed in relief at the completion of his first objective.

According to Subaru's plan, the remaining objectives were…

…Wait, what were they again?

"Awww, crap. I can't remember… Oh well."

No doubt there was a backup plan in case Garfiel didn't win—a plan for keeping everyone alive as they sought shelter in the Sanctuary. That didn't matter, though. It was fine even if he forgot.

As long as he won, there was no need to remember that plan. With that final thought, he slammed both his shields together in front of him.

Garfiel steeled himself with the clamor of metal scraping against metal. Elsa licked her lips at the sight.

"—Elsa Gramhilde, the Bowel Hunter."

"Garfiel Tinzel, the Sanctuary's Ultra-strong Shield."

The assassin's bloodred smile melted into the darkness right as she started freely bounding in all directions, awaiting his pursuit.

Just before they collided, Garfiel crinkled his nose, bared his fangs, and howled:

"This is one hell of a first battle, General, so ya better hold up your end!"

3

Just how many times had he visited this oh-so-familiar room to meet her like this?

The first time they'd met was in the evening of the day Subaru had first arrived at Roswaal Manor. He had no trouble breaking through the illusion she'd cast on the hallway with ease, setting foot into this very same archive of forbidden books.

There was little doubt that both of them had made the worst impressions imaginable during their first encounter.

After she robbed his still-recovering body of mana, Subaru went down without even putting up a fight. Burning with the need for revenge, he later went on to prod and annoy her at every opportunity, continuously interfering with her alone time.

He spent two months at Roswaal Manor like this. During that time, Subaru and the girl—Beatrice—argued and fought on numerous occasions, getting along rather childishly.

When they saw each other, a commotion was bound to occur. Yet, curiously, their likes and tastes matched in the strangest and

most unexpected of ways.

Why? Somehow, it constantly bothered Subaru that she seemed alone.

Even now, he thought of those days and the time they'd spent together as something irreplaceable that bonded them together.

Subaru had returned to see Beatrice once more, and this time, he would never, ever let go of her again.

"You want to take Betty away from this place…?"

Bewildered, Beatrice repeated the declaration Subaru had made upon entering the room.

Still seated on the stool in its customary position, she hugged the black book to her chest all the tighter.

She clutched the book of knowledge entrusted to her by her mother, its pages of prophecy blank.

"Is that…any of your business, I wonder? No one asked you…to do such a thing."

"I figured you'd say that, but I don't have time for a long debate. I'm bringing you out of here with me one way or another."

"What a self-serving… Would you leave this instant, I wonder? Leave and have a good cry on that girl's lap."

"You trying to start a fight…?! You keep that up, and it's gonna be war…!!"

Subaru's lips trembled in shame as she brought up memories of him making a fool of himself. If anything, Emilia's lap pillows were an enormous blessing, but he couldn't rely on her at the moment.

Emilia was currently giving her all in the Sanctuary. It was Subaru's job to do the same at the mansion.

"Anyway, there's no time for chitchat. You know what's going on outside, don't you?"

"…I understand there are intruders in the mansion, I suppose. Still, why should Betty get involved in this dispute? Anyone who wishes to scuffle in the dirt should do as they please."

"Unfortunately, the situation isn't friendly enough to be called a scuffle. I left the fight against Tough Enemy Number One to a promising newcomer, but…he's too much of a softy."

Shaking his head at Beatrice's words, Subaru racked his brain as he mulled over how their allies had been deployed throughout the estate.

The greatest asset they had—Garfiel—was almost certainly already engaging the main threat—Elsa. Both possessed

superhuman strength, so they could be considered evenly matched —or at least, Subaru hoped so. He couldn't be certain.

It was less that Garfiel was too soft and more that he was incredibly kindhearted. That was the proper way to express it.

Subaru and company had strategically relied on that kindness to defeat him during their confrontation at the Sanctuary. How his deeply emotional personality would influence the current combat situation at the manor was anyone's guess.

Subaru couldn't dismiss the possibility that Garfiel would, instead of pitying his opponent, be so concerned for his allies that it'd end up dulling his claws and fangs.

To get everyone in the mansion out safe and sound, Garfiel had to be in peak fighting condition to draw off their powerful foe.

"Basically, that means I have to eliminate any obstacles that get in the way of our Lethal Weapon so he can go all out. I've left Petra in Otto's hands, and I'm relying on Frederica to secure Rem, so…"

"That leaves just you and Betty… Is that what you are trying to say, I wonder?"

"Yep, that's pretty much it."

If there was nothing holding him back, Garfiel could unleash his full power. That was why the top priority was getting Petra and the others out of the mansion first. He was sure Frederica would secure Rem and meet back up with everyone else in short order.

"And the last piece of the puzzle is me getting you out of here. If you don't wanna run hand in hand, I'll carry you in my arms or on my back, whatever you like. Just so we're clear, I'm not budging on this."

"Don't make me repeat myself. Is your help even necessary, I wonder?"

When Subaru tried to take one step closer, Beatrice refused him in a low voice.

She swiveled her head about, as if meaning to address the room instead of Subaru.

"Betty is in control of the Great Spirit's archive of forbidden books, a place isolated from the fleeting outside world. No matter what menace lies beyond those doors, does it even matter, I wonder? Your concern is unnecessary."

"Nah, I can't let this slide. Your archive of forbidden books is awesome, all right. No argument there. But it's got a fatal flaw. More importantly, the other side knows exactly how to beat it."

This critique of her Passage ability, the foundation of her confidence, made Beatrice raise her eyebrows with displeasure.

Certainly, when it came to staying hidden, the archive of forbidden books offered countless advantages. However, Subaru had seen for himself on previous runs that these advantages were not absolute.

"Your Passage is only effective on closed doors. If someone opens all the doors in the mansion…"

The last one would lead straight into the archive of forbidden books without fail. In a prior run, Elsa had used that method to trespass upon the archive, attacking Beatrice in an attempt to take her life.

The archive wasn't safe. He was doing his best to explain, but—

"—Why does the enemy know of this weakness, I wonder?"

Beatrice's question made Subaru catch his breath.

"Roswaal told them…that must be how they know."

She'd arrived at the conclusion so quickly that Subaru had no chance to offer up any excuse.

He could only gaze in astonishment as Beatrice's certainty deepened. The assailants had come to the mansion on Roswaal's instructions, and it was necessary to defeat Beatrice's Passage in order to achieve their goals. Roswaal must have had a reason for why that had to come to pass. In other words—

"Is Betty's death recorded in Roswaal's book of knowledge, I wonder?"

After voicing that musing, Beatrice briefly let out a breath.

Phew. Like a spontaneous sigh of relief. The sight sent Subaru into a fit of rage.

"You…! What was that sigh just now…? Why do you look like you're okay with all this?!"

"…If you have come this far, surely you understand. Roswaal is simply upholding what is written in the book of knowledge, I suppose. If this is the result, Betty's fate is already sealed."

"What the hell are you…? Roswaal's book is his, and your book is yours, right? Or are you telling me that book you're hugging says at some point he's going to have you killed?!"

Subaru jabbed a finger toward the book of knowledge, which Beatrice clutched as if hoping to shatter her resignation.

The truth was that he already knew Beatrice's mystic tome was empty. Not once in four centuries' time had any prophecies of the

future appeared within its pages.

When Subaru shouted at her, Beatrice cast her gaze downward and slowly opened the book in her arms. Then she turned its contents toward him, revealing there was indeed nothing written inside.

“There isn’t anything in here, I suppose. Betty’s fate is a blank page.”

“Then that means you don’t have any reason to let Roswaal have his way! You should decide what you wanna do for yourself the way you always have!”

“…The way I always have?”

Beatrice’s eyes went wide, blinking as she softly repeated those words.

Her voice, sounding as if it was devoid of all emotion, left Subaru speechless.

However, those blue eyes of hers glinted with something unmistakable—a cavernous sorrow.

“Just what did Betty decide on for herself in all those days?”

As she murmured, Beatrice meticulously turned the pages of the tome with her slender fingers, as if she thought those pristine pages represented the sum total of the long years she had spent blank and empty.

“I have continued to protect this mansion, all alone, because Mother asked me to… When did I ever make a choice of my own? Who is this Beatrice you speak of, and what has she done for herself?”

“…Beatrice…”

“Is Betty’s life not as barren as this book, I wonder? Is it not as empty? I have decided nothing for myself. No accomplishments or achievements… I have nothing at all…”

Softly, she closed the book of knowledge. Beatrice slowly stroked the front cover of the tome that bore no title. She caressed it gently, enviously. Then she quietly spoke again.

“Truly…it would have been better if Betty were simply a book.”

Unable to indulge in even fleeting fantasy, Beatrice confessed her sad, painful wish.

If only she could be a doll without a heart, a storybook unshaken by the passage of time, then she wouldn’t have to suffer.

But she couldn’t. And so she grieved.

“Sadly, Betty does have a heart. After waiting for so long that

all hope and faith faded away, certain thoughts came unbidden. Were these fears and worries, I wonder? Many a night have I gathered my memories and clung to them, anxious that I might one day forget my mother's face or smile."

Digging her nails into the book she clutched to her chest, Beatrice bit her lip as she glared at Subaru.

"There were times when I was afraid of being alone and desperately wanted to be with someone, anyone. But as the years went by, everyone eventually left Betty behind. They all said something incomprehensible about how it was for something so important… Mother left! And so did Roswaal! Even Ryuzu!"

Beatrice shouted, on the verge of tears as her face contorted.

The names she shouted struck Subaru as he recalled everything he had learned about Beatrice back in the Sanctuary.

In the short time the two girls spent together, she had undoubtedly formed a bond with Ryuzu Meyer, the girl who had become a sacrifice to protect the Sanctuary—something that scarred Beatrice's heart to this day.

"Betty…the spirit Beatrice…has always been alone, destined to be left behind by everyone else… But now I can rest a tiny bit easier, I suppose."

"…Why? Why would you feel relieved that you might be killed by someone you know?"

"The reason is obvious."

Beatrice responded to Subaru's strained voice with a single nod.

A fleeting smile came over her lips; it was one that showed a yearning for something that lay deep in the past.

"Even if it's only within Roswaal's book of knowledge, the fact that Betty has been recorded… Does that mean Mother has not forgotten about her daughter, I wonder?"

With a little smile, Beatrice spoke those words, as if they were some kind of salvation.

The girl seemed happy, as if a death sentence written in the mystic tome left by her mother was exactly what she hoped for. As if she could find peace by dying at the hands of a man who belonged to the same household she had treated like family for centuries.

After four hundred years of faithfully waiting and wishing, Beatrice was happy to finally fulfill her mother's wishes, even if it meant death.

It was precisely because she'd insisted on following her mother's instructions with blind devotion that Beatrice couldn't do anything but accept her fate. She believed in Echidna the Witch like a martyr ready to sacrifice herself for the faith.

This much was plain to see in the pure liberation that suffused her smile—

"Give it a rest already."

That unsettling, intolerable smile made the fire in Subaru's chest burn all the hotter.

The tragic happiness Beatrice felt after seemingly confirming her mother's love was a twisted thing. It was utter garbage.

As if condemning her daughter to death could ever be considered a form of motherly love.

"…What do you…intend to do?"

Subaru was so consumed by righteous indignation that he had stepped forward without even noticing. The disconcerting expression on his face made Beatrice stiffen warily.

"Were you even listening, I wonder? What is it you plan to do? Does it need to be explained that whatever you intend, Betty shall show no mercy, I wonder? I have…already accepted my fate."

"What a load of bullcrap. You're just like Roswaal. You haven't changed a bit. Actually, you're a lot worse. At least Roswaal knows what he's doing. Why do you have to make everything more complicated, damn it?"

Boundless anger began welling up within him. When he thought about it, ever since he had become involved in the events surrounding the Sanctuary, Subaru had been wrestling with his wrath over and over.

He had been angry with himself during the Trials; angry at the Witches, who toyed with him; angry at Garfiel, the stubborn kid who looked down on him; angry at Roswaal, the man who was trying to prove the frailty of Subaru's beliefs by doggedly adhering to what was preordained; and angry at Emilia, who refused to believe in not only Subaru's love but also herself.

And now he was angry at fate itself after seeing Beatrice abandon all hope.

"Beatrice, you're an idiot. Dumb as rocks, that's for sure! It hurts just looking at you!!"

"Wha…?!"

Subaru's sudden outburst of anger and the abrupt segue left

Beatrice speechless.

The irritation and confusion she felt prevented her from immediately raising her voice. Subaru took advantage of that bewilderment to pile on her even more.

"You had four hundred years to figure this out! Why is the only thing you ever came up with so extreme…?! Why'd you think of only one plan?! There are so many other things you could've done, damn it!!"

"O-of course I thought about it! Betty tried checking if there was anything on these blank pages again and again…but nothing ever changed!"

"That's why you're an idiot! What about trying to heat them to see if anything was written in invisible ink?! These days, no one falls for that trick anymore, even when it's a novelty New Year's card! Consider some more possibilities, would you?!"

The persistently blank pages of the tome had convinced Beatrice that her fate simply led to a dead end.

But if that wasn't necessarily true… If there was another possibility, then—

"Like what if your mother messed up and gave you the wrong book by mistake?!"

"Huh…?"

The latest theory Subaru proposed was so haphazard that Beatrice didn't even know how to respond. That surprise quickly gave way to anger as Beatrice's ire only grew.

"Do you intend to insult Mother, I wonder?! Mother would never make such a stupid mista—"

"Can you say for sure it absolutely couldn't happen? You don't have even the slightest doubt? Are you so certain the only possible explanation is that your mother deliberately handed her own daughter a book with nothing but blank pages?"

Subaru used fallacies and questionable logic to massage and obfuscate the truth.

It was still a mystery to him what Echidna's true intentions had been when she gave Beatrice the book of knowledge. He wouldn't put it past the foul Witch to entrust someone with it just to mess with their head.

But after hearing about the past of the Sanctuary from Ryuzu, he felt like the Echidna in that tale was different than the twisted person he met. The truth continued to elude him. That said, the

truth wasn't important here.

What he needed to do now was knock down the walls surrounding Beatrice's heart and say the magic words that would pull her toward him.

"Why…would you put it that way…?" Overwhelmed by Subaru's force of will, Beatrice's voice wavered, her eyes losing focus.

She firmly believed in her mother. The mother she loved and respected would never try to ensnare her on purpose. And yet, Beatrice stubbornly shook her head. When she weighed blind faith against love and respect, she chose blind faith.

It was as if she wanted to continue clinging to her mother's words, which she never once doubted over the course of four hundred years.

"M-Mother surely would never make such a mistake. I-is that not obvious, I wonder? This is Mother we're talking about! Would you doubt your own mother's words?!"

"Of course I would! The times I can trust her don't come along all that often! My mom's the same person who heard a report about a satellite falling into 'the atmosphere' and somehow thought it was 'Aichi Prefecture.' I stopped believing any news that came from her mouth after that! It'd be mega-embarrassing if I spread around something that stupid again!"

It was impossible to forget how he'd been mocked by his classmates and neighbors for taking that story seriously and sharing it with everyone. To top it all off, the original culprit herself forgot she had started the whole thing and even asked him, *Why on earth did you tell people that?*

Ever since that series of events in his third year of primary school, Subaru had staunchly refused to blindly believe what either of his parents had to say about anything. In fact, he'd learned to doubt his father's words even earlier on in life.

That was why Beatrice's unshakable faith in her mother as an infallible existence irked Subaru to no end.

"Even if I had twice as many fingers, I wouldn't be able to count on my hands how many times an argument between my dad and me ended with a fistfight, and that's in the span of less than twenty years. You've had twenty times that. You're telling me you never had doubts like that even once?"

"I simply do not understand… What is it you want Betty to say,

I wonder?! I cannot understand at all! Your desire, your objective… They make no sense! None at all!”

“Fine. I’ll say it straight so that even idiots like you and your mother can hear me loud and clear!”

As Beatrice started clutching at her head, Subaru drew near and grasped both her hands.

From above, he brought his face close to Beatrice’s, coming so close that he could feel the teary-eyed girl’s breaths.

“Stop letting an empty book and a verbal promise you made four centuries ago control you. Beatrice, what you want to do is your choice.”

“

good head on your shoulders."

"Would you…just be silent, I wonder…?"

"No, I won't. You want to stop upholding the pact? That'd be fine by me. You're the one who hates keeping your promise so much that you literally want to die. No one would blame you for wanting to break it."

"I would blame myself! Why can you not seem to understand this?!"

"You're the one who doesn't understand. If keeping that promise you made means dying, you should just break the promise and live. That's what I'd do; is it so weird I'd make that choice?"

Beatrice, who continued obsessing over the pact, looked at Subaru like he were some kind of monster beyond all comprehension.

Subaru found it pretty baffling to be perceived that way.

Of course he knew keeping your word was important.

He'd been scolded by Emilia more than once for breaking his promises, and he'd learned that the hard way after enduring quite a few painful experiences. That's why even someone like him had taken to heart how important it was to not go back on a promise.

Despite that, Subaru didn't feel any reluctance whatsoever in telling Beatrice to break hers.

He'd already explained his reasoning. It didn't even merit a second thought.

"H-how can you be so impudent and devious, I wonder…?"

"I know I'm the brazen sort, and I've reflected on how that's gotten me into trouble before. Still, I'll never budge on the important stuff."

Subaru's answer would not change. From the beginning, the issue at hand was Beatrice's heart.

She could not conceal her shock and confusion as he told her to ignore her pact. That much was expected. In this world, pacts bore enormous weight to the beings known as spirits.

He was in love with a spirit mage himself, so Subaru was well aware of the gravity of the situation.

He understood completely. And even so, Subaru told Beatrice to prioritize herself over the pact.

"I-if you were…the one I've been waiting for…then maybe…"

As Subaru continued to stand close by, Beatrice gazed at him, slowly shaking her head side to side.

A single duty had remained entwined around Beatrice's heart, chaining her down for four hundred years even as the blank pages of her mother's keepsake whittled her heart away. This mission of hers was the greatest reason she had not relinquished the pact despite all her suffering.

If she only completed this duty, Beatrice could finally be free.

Accordingly, Beatrice peered into Subaru's black eyes, as if clinging to them, as if giving her heart to them.

"Would you…?"

As if out of breath, she exhaled slowly, seemingly trying to forgive herself…

"Would you…become That Person for Betty?"

This was tantamount to asking him to finally bring an end to Beatrice's four centuries of emptiness.

He recalled Echidna's words. This was precisely the reply that the Witch of Greed desired.

Given that there was no right answer as to who That Person was, would Beatrice eventually select one of her own accord?

This was the question the Witch had entrusted to her daughter in order to satisfy her own curiosity, forcing Beatrice into four centuries of loneliness in the process.

The question Beatrice just uttered was the fruit of all that time, the end result after four hundred excruciating years.

"

all he found on the other side was a simple guest room. Passage had already activated, and Subaru had been barred from the archive of forbidden books once more.

The moment he forcefully announced his true feelings on the matter, Subaru had been locked out.

"I had more stuff to say… Damn that short-tempered toddler…!"

He'd chosen his words poorly. His chest ached as he recalled how the last expressions he'd seen Beatrice make were ones of sadness and anger.

He hadn't told Beatrice everything he wanted to say to her yet. If he didn't find a way back into the archive of forbidden books right away—

"—Mr. Natsuki?!"

A voice held Subaru in place just as he was about to run off in search of the archive. When he turned to check behind him, his eyes met those of someone peeking in his direction from the next room over.

It was none other than Otto, who had accompanied Subaru to the mansion and should have been operating independently. And just like Otto, Petra was also sticking her head out to see what was going on. Subaru widened his eyes in surprise as realization dawned upon him.

"Damn it, you guys… Why are you still in the mansion?! You only needed to open the doors on the first floor, and the plan was to run as soon as that was taken care of, right?"

"That is true, but unfortunately, a problem has arisen within the mansion…"

Though initially surprised by the unexpected reunion, Subaru's face went pale when Otto mentioned some trouble was afoot.

Securing an escape route out of the mansion and using it to elude the enemy was the crux of their plan. Accordingly, Subaru had entrusted that duty to Otto. If he couldn't do it, no one could. If even Otto had deemed it too difficult, then there was no choice but to accept it was an impossible task.

"What happened? The short version, please."

"This is the work of the Beast Master you spoke of, I presume. The interior of the mansion is already filled with demon beasts."

"That must mean Meili's here, huh…but she already should've been accounted for."

Otto's hushed report left deep creases in Subaru's brow.

The two assailants—Elsa the Bowel Hunter and Meili the Beast Master—were basically sisters of slaughter.

The danger Elsa posed was painfully obvious, but Meili's command over demon beasts was something that could not be taken lightly if they wanted to make it out of this encounter in one piece. So of course, he'd readied a countermeasure—

"—But there are demon beasts the repel stones don't work on at all!!"

Even in the darkness, he could tell Petra's face was red as she shouted and beat Subaru's question to the punch. The girl was gripping a glowing blue crystal—a phosphorescent stone for warding off demon beasts. This was what Subaru and the others had prepared to neutralize the Beast Master.

"Wait, seriously?! I was sure that if we had these demon-beast repel stones, they'd keep them away like during the Urugarum incident… Why isn't it working?!"

"I don't know! Perhaps the ones that appeared here are exceptions, but at any rate, assuming these demon beasts have appeared throughout the entire manor, even reaching the marquis's room will be…"

Extremely difficult. Otto left this part unspoken as he finished explaining how the odds had abruptly turned against them. Then—

"—?!?"

Subaru felt an impact come from below his soles, instantly drawing his attention. He quickly noticed there was an odd warping underneath the red carpet covering the corridor floor. It bulged further, and then—it burst.

The tremors and deformation of the corridor had merely been a harbinger. The real show of destruction was occurring on the floor below, causing the entire west wing of the mansion to collapse, taking the corridor they were in along with it. The windows cracked, the wooden beams flew apart, and the whole mansion seemed to groan under the strain.

As he lost his footing, Subaru found his body suddenly floating in midair. Reflexively, he reached out and yanked a tiny body toward him. As he fell toward the center of the hole, he tried to at least shield the small child pressed against his chest before they hit the ground.

"—Make sure you don't let go!!"

When that thunderous voice rang in his eardrums amid all the destruction, Subaru did everything he could to obey. A moment later, he felt his body being pulled by the scruff of his neck. Then he was unceremoniously tossed to the ground, which made for an admittedly much softer landing.

He felt his cheek brushing up against grass. When Subaru looked around, he saw he had rolled onto the green, open yard outside the mansion.

"J-just now, that was…"

"Miss Frederica!"

When Subaru shook his head and looked up, Petra leaped out of his arms. Her gaze was focused on someone whose blond hair was beautifully flapping in the wind; it was none other than Frederica herself.

Petra's eyes glimmered as the older maid elegantly brushed the young girl's hair back and gently wiped the grime off her cheek.

"Even if this is an emergency, please forgive my impropriety. Frederica Baumann has returned."

"Frederica!!"

Overcome with emotion, Petra threw herself toward Frederica, who smiled as she gently caught her adorable junior and held the girl close to her chest. Consequently, Otto, who Frederica had been supporting on her right side, was unceremoniously dumped onto the grass.

"Ow!! Wait a minute! I'm grateful you saved my life, but what is this rough handling?!"

"I—I am very sorry, Master Otto. She was simply higher on my list of priorities…"

"Women and children, the elderly, men, and then Otto, huh?"

"Have I been exiled from even the ranks of men?!"

Setting Otto's complaints aside, their group quickly confirmed they were all unharmed. Thanks to Frederica, everyone present had emerged from the manor safely. This was not limited to Subaru, Otto, and Petra, either.

"Master Subaru—I have brought her here with me, as requested."

Still holding Petra, Frederica turned around to show Subaru what she meant. There, firmly secured to her back with bedsheets, was a sleeping girl—Rem. Instantly, Subaru's breath caught in his throat.

But that initial stiffness almost immediately gave way to relief.

"You did… Thank you…for getting her out safe and sound. I mean it."

"It was the natural thing to do. More importantly, we have a pressing problem to deal with…"

Subaru brushed a finger against Rem's cheek as she continued to sleep. While he did that, he looked intently at Frederica to convey his thanks. Then he followed her gaze to the west wing of the mansion, which was spectacularly wrecked.

The sheer extent of the damage made it seem like a giant truck had crashed right into the building. To be fair, that metaphor wasn't that much of an exaggeration. The only difference was that instead of a truck—

"—What…is that?"

Otto stood up and brushed off his knees as he posed the question. It was something everyone present wondered, with the exception of the sleeping Rem. If Subaru had to guess…

"It looks like a really huge hippo to me."

The creature they were staring at was enormous. The color and texture of its hide resembled a boulder, and the four limbs it boasted seemed as thick and stout as millstones. It had a dreadful, vile face, red eyes that brimmed with hostility, and a broken horn perched on the tip of its nose. Moreover, this demon beast had a tiny figure riding on its back.

"Huh. That's amazing. I'm kinda shocked our attack just now didn't take anybody out."

Straddling the back of the enormous demon beast, the little girl waved her legs all about as she addressed them with an amused voice. The cruel, innocent ring to her words was familiar to Subaru —and to Petra as well.

She was clad in black clothing, while her deep-blue hair was tied up in a braid—

"—Meili!"

"Oh? None of you folks seems to be all that surprised. I'm just a little disappointed."

When Subaru shouted her name, Meili drew her lips back, unhappy that she'd failed to surprise them with what was supposed to be her big reveal. Unfortunately, Subaru and company had no reason to humor her.

“You busting up the mansion like this is a way bigger deal! The hell you think you’re doing?!”

“Well, I couldn’t find the maids who were our target. So I had Rock Piggie pitch in. And thanks to that, I ended up finding all of you, right?”

Meili touched a finger to her cheek, showing not a single shred of guilt as she sized up her prey. While it certainly had been the fastest way to draw them out, they would have all been annihilated if Frederica had not been there.

“But you really surprised me. I mean, this job should’ve been easy. Now everything’s behind schedule.”

“That so? If you’re off schedule, you should report to your superior and await further instructions. If you use your own on-site judgment, there’s no telling what huge and terrible problems might happen.”

“Tee-hee-hee. Nooope. You can’t trick me.”

Despite the alien encounter and being cornered by demon beasts, Subaru carried on an exceedingly normal-sounding exchange with Meili.

Compared with Elsa, Meili was an improvement—she didn’t take potshots at his innards midconversation. But unsurprisingly, she was similarly immune to his attempts at persuasion. Even as they shared what seemed like a friendly chat, he could sense demon beasts gradually closing in on the yard.

The group had successfully gotten out of the building, but it’d be a mistake to call it an escape. It had not changed the fact that they were surrounded by demon beasts—if anything, their situation seemed far more precarious than before.

“I feel sorry for Elsa, but I’m going to take all the maids for myself. Ah, no need to worry. I’ll be gentle to Petra. We are friends, after all.”

“Y-yay, I’m so happy—If we’re friends, that means you’ll let us go, right—?”

“Tee-hee-hee. Of *course* we’re friends. That’s why we’ll get along until the *veeery* end, right?”

“Uh, Subaru, sorry, but I tried my best, and it still didn’t work…”

Their ways of expressing friendship were simply too different.

Petra bravely attempted to negotiate, but that ended in failure.

Meili was still young, but she was already thoroughly versed in the ethos of a hired killer. Her moral values had already been deeply twisted. To her, evil and good were indistinguishable. They would not find any common ground.

“Master Subaru…”

“Frederica? What are…? Whoa!”

Suddenly, before Subaru could come up with an escape plan, the older maid stood directly in front of him with Rem still on her back. Frederica did not respond to his call and instead undid the knots, freeing Rem.

Subaru instantly moved to her to catch Rem’s sleeping body before it fell. And then—

“—I shall provide that girl, no, that assassin with the proper hospitality. During that time, all of you…”

“M-Miss Frederica! Y-you mustn’t!”

Petra clung to Frederica, who had boldly declared she would act as a rear guard for the party. Subaru had simply gone silent. Frederica gently turned her gaze toward the young maid, who refused to let go of her waist.

“Stop, Miss Frederica! This is exactly the same as before… We’ve only just met again, and…”

“No, it’s different now… After all, last time, I was resigned to death.”

“—!”

“So much has changed. After ten years, I have reunited with Garf…with my younger brother. And I have you, my unspeakably adorable junior. I have never been happier. And that’s why I refuse to be defeated here.”

Frederica spoke to Petra while gently stroking her head. Seeing the will residing in those jade eyes from up close, Petra said no more. But surely, she understood these were not empty words to make her feel better.

The woman she looked up to refused to compromise on what she believed in, and she was ready to see it through with force. Frederica was truly Garfiel’s elder sister.

“Frederica! We’ll head for Roswaal’s room!”

“Please do. I shall join you once I have given this girl a proper spanking.”

Subaru called out to her after securing Rem to his back.

Offering a graceful reply in turn, Frederica readied herself for the imminent battle.

Garfiel versus Elsa; Frederica versus Meili—having the beast person siblings handle the sisters of subterfuge was probably the best outcome they could have hoped for. Now they just had to survive the attack.

"Otto! Take Petra!"

"Loud and clear!"

Grasping the barked instruction, Otto set off running with Petra in tow. With Rem on his back, Subaru raced ahead of them, guiding them to the entrance into the mansion from the yard.

"Hey, hold on a…! Don't decide stuff on your own like that! Petraaaaa!"

"Thbpttt!"

The sight of Subaru and company fleeing at full speed made Meili cry out from atop the demon beast. Though teary-eyed, Petra gave an immediate reply, sticking out her tongue tauntingly.

With that, Subaru and the others fled into the mansion. Meili moved to pursue them, but—

"—Dear guest, from here on, I will have to insist you remain with me and enjoy the Mathers family's hospitality!"

"Gaaah! I'll make you regret this! Get her, Rock Piggie!!"

"—!!!"

Looking down at Frederica, who was blocking her path, Meili puffed up her cheeks as her temper flared. Heeding the command of its master, the enormous, boulder-like demon beast issued a roar that echoed across the entire grounds.

With a flutter of her skirt, Frederica's arms creaked as they transformed.

"Now, come closer. I'll be teaching you some harsh lessons today! Prepare yourself."

5

Splitting up from Frederica, Subaru and company made a beeline for the mansion's main wing, aiming for the topmost floor.

"Otto! Anything to worry about from behind?!"

"Miss Frederica is managing somehow! However, we still have no good way to deal with demon beasts!"

As they raced down a corridor, Otto asserted the demon beasts

were a pressing issue that remained unresolved. Subaru didn't have a new plan ready yet. What could they use against demon beasts that were immune to repel stones…?

"How about we use your blessing of language and your pro bargaining skills to negotiate with the demon beasts and convince them to let us escape? You'd get all the glory!"

"Most demon beasts only go, *Me swallow you whole*. That does not constitute a conversation…"

"This isn't the time for joking around!! If…if we don't do something fast, Miss Frederica will—!"

Petra's desperate plea made Subaru and Otto cut the banter and focus their thoughts on coming up with a plan.

At present, their goal was to reach Roswaal's study—and the secret escape route leading outside, which was concealed behind a bookshelf in the room. That would allow them to circumvent the demon beasts surrounding the manor.

However, it was inevitable that those monsters would impede them prior to their arrival—

"Mr. Natsuki! There's some black-winged mice in front!"

"Whoa!"

While Subaru was deep in thought, some black shadows had flown toward him in the moonlit corridor and were already right before his eyes.

These were demon beasts with round bodies, about the size of puppies, that resembled flying mice with black, bat-like wings. Two of the creatures, worthy of the name *black-winged mice*, aimed their sharp fangs at Subaru.

"Go away!!"

Petra raised the repel stone aloft, instantly driving off the black-winged mice.

"You saved my bacon, Petra! …But this means the stone isn't completely ineffective, doesn't it?"

"Against normal demon beasts, it works just fine! For the moment, it is ineffective only against a single demon beast. So long as that beast is not…"

"Meaning that one is—"

Special, he was about to say, but two things happened before he could—the sound of an impact ringing out, followed by high-pitched death cries.

From the back of the corridor, in the darkness where the

moonlight did not reach, a monstrous claw flashed, drawing out screams and fresh blood simultaneously. The fearsome blow tore the wings off the black-winged mice, leaving them helplessly falling and rolling onto the carpet. Pitch-black blood coursed from their wounds as the two demon beasts convulsed. An enormous maw reached forward to snap up their bodies, chewing on them.

The murderous sounds of snapping bones and bloody flesh being consumed reverberated across the corridor. Then he saw *it*.

The creature had the head of a lion, a torso like that of a horse, a tail resembling a serpent, and a fearsome twisting horn protruding from its face—a sovereign among demon beasts, with the entirety of its being embodying the word *danger*.

—This was the demon beast that Subaru had once seen slay Petra. And its name was…

“Totally forgot it, but… So we meet again, you shitty demon beast…!”

“

CHAPTER 2

HAPPINESS REFLECTED UPON THE WATER'S SURFACE

1

"—Heeey, Lia. Don't wobble your head like that and sit still, would you?"

Before she opened her eyes, the first thing she heard was a soft, lovely voice.

Slowly, as if guided by the voice, her consciousness floated to the surface. Her vision was hazy. In the span of several blinks, she realized she was sitting in a chair and this was her own house.

It was their house, built from the hollow of a great tree in the forest. She was sitting in her own chair in the living room.

"Goodness, how long are you going to be such a spoiled little child? You're *really* incorrigible, you know."

From so close that she could feel her breath, she heard a voice so gentle, it seemed to embrace her. It caused such a stirring in her chest that the girl—Emilia—hurriedly looked over.

She immediately spotted a woman with short silver hair, a foul look in her eyes, and who, to Emilia, was the ideal woman.

"Mom…"

"You turned so quickly, it surprised me… Did you doze off? Were you catching a nap while leaving me to do your hair…? We truly have a lazy Princess on our hands."

As Emilia's eyes went wide, her mother—Fortuna—smiled with an air of exasperation. She did not understand why she felt so deeply moved by simply seeing the sharp eyes and soft expression of her mother.

"Mom…"

"Mm? What's wrong? If something happened, you can tell me

anything."

"You're really dressed up today, huh, Mom? It's *really* cute."

"—! Is that all? And here I was getting worried only for you to tease me."

With just a hint of a blush, Fortuna flicked Emilia's forehead with a finger. Putting a hand on her forehead, Emilia went "eh-heh-heh" and grinned.

Emilia was always proud of her mother, but she thought Fortuna looked especially beautiful that day. This was because she was actually wearing a skirt for once instead of her usual easy-to-move-in attire. Though her clothes had minimal adornment, the color-matched, fresh-looking outfit suited Fortuna very well.

"Oh, look at you. Even though you have such a cute face, it's quite a mess today… You really do seem like you're still half-asleep. I thought I sent you to wash your hair at the watering hole earlier. Did you just have a drink and come back?"

"*Hmph*, Mom's making fun of me again. There isn't even the tiniest smidgen of carelessness in my whole body. Everyone else always says that I'm *really* well-behaved, too."

"Even though you still use such ridiculous phrases, I'm *really* worried other people are filling your head with silly ideas. I'd better have a little chat with Archi after this."

The way she pressed her lips together seemed to indicate dissatisfaction, but the way Fortuna pressed a palm against her forehead clashed with that image. Her mother proceeded to move in front of the sullen Emilia and resumed doing her hair once more.

She had long hair, silver just like Fortuna's. Her mother braided it up with practiced ease like she used magic.

"Okay, now it's all nice and beautiful. Go look in the mirror."

"Mm-hmm, thanks, Mom. The mirror…"

When Fortuna patted her on the shoulder, Emilia stood up with a big grin to do as she was told. The little girl proceeded to turn toward the full-length mirror—but then she stopped.

"Emilia?"

Fortuna called out to her daughter with a questioning voice. But Emilia did not reply. For some reason, she could not approach the full-length mirror. Even she did not know the reason why.

Her legs were cramped. As Emilia stewed in melancholy, salvation came to her from a different direction.

She heard the sound of someone knocking on the door to their

home. Lifting her head with a gasp, Emilia went, “A guest!” and whirled around, her legs hastily taking her in that direction. And then—

“—Good morning to you, Lady Emilia. I am overjoyed that you came to greet me.”

When she opened the door in a fair bit of a hurry, Emilia’s breath caught as the tall visitor on the other side greeted her. The man, with green hair and soft features, smiled at her.

Seeing the tranquil benevolence residing in this individual’s eyes, Emilia could not help but break into a broad smile.

“Geuse… G-good morning to you.”

“Yes, it has been some time, Lady Emilia. I hope you will treat me kindly today.”

“Today…?”

Hearing words of greeting from the visiting man—Geuse—made Emilia tilt her head in confusion. That curious reaction elicited an “oh my” from Geuse, who raised a curious eyebrow.

“Are you not aware? I had thought we had sent word beforehand…”

“Geuse, don’t take her seriously. Lia’s just being a sleepyhead this morning.”

“*Grrr*, I can’t believe Mom’s still saying stuff like that…”

Fortuna’s exasperated voice made Emilia look over, but her words caught in her throat. Fortuna was not dressed like normal, and she was holding a basket clearly meant for going out and about. Emilia could faintly smell herb-grilled meat sandwiched between cuts of her mother’s handmade bread. In other words—

“—Ah! We’re going to the lake?”

“Why, this girl looks like she only just remembered even though she’s the one who asked to go…”

“Did I really? …Maybe I did ask. If that’s true, then I just get to be twice as happy.”

When she thought back on it, she felt like she had made a request just like that. And having forgotten it, the instant she remembered made her feel like she’d gotten to enjoy it two times over.

“…Geuse, what do you think of her?”

“It is rather in character for Lady Emilia, I believe. She specializes in doubling her happiness. Perhaps we have a thing or two to learn from her.”

“You spoiling her irresponsibly puts me in a bind, though. Goodness…it must be Sister’s blood in her.”

Fortuna sighed as she touched a hand to her forehead. Then when she noticed Geuse training his gaze firmly upon her, she gave him a sharp look as if asking, *What…?*

“No, it would be better not to worsen your mood…”

“We’ve known each other long enough. There’s nothing you can say that will shake me now, Geuse.”

“Then I shall speak the words. Lady Fortuna, your clothing choices this day are dazzling. I find myself rather enchanted by the sight of you.”

When Geuse spoke his mind with a guileless look on his face, Fortuna stiffened for a brief moment.

“—!”

Then Fortuna’s face turned red. An instant later, with a powerful punch to his shoulder, she sent Geuse flying.

Forgotten in the commotion, the basket was in danger of falling onto the floor, but Emilia caught it just in the nick of time.

2

“Did I truly say something rude I should not have…?”

“No, it’s not that. Mom gets embarrassed *really* easily, so she couldn’t help but blush when you said that to her, Geuse. *Tee-hee*, Mom’s so cute.”

“Don’t go around making things up! Geuse is… He is a man wicked to the core.”

With the quarrel at home out of the way, the three amicably strolled along—Fortuna marched ahead in a huff, with Emilia and Geuse walking side by side as they headed for the lake in the forest.

The incident upon their departure had Fortuna in a mood, and Geuse had gotten worked up over that, but from Emilia’s point of view, Fortuna wasn’t really angry—she was just shy. Emilia was a little aggravated that Geuse seemed to be the only one who wasn’t picking up on that.

But the relationship between Geuse and her mother was close, if a bit prickly, and certainly a happy one.

“Oh my, Lady Fortuna.” “And Emilia and Geuse, too.” “Good to see parent and child getting along.”

The housewives living close by commented and called out as

they watched the trio heading down the path toward the lake. Before Fortuna could whip out a snappy retort, Geuse said, “You are obviously very loved,” and the happy smile on his face made Fortuna swallow her words.

“…I—I suppose,” was the only reply she could muster.

Then as Fortuna inconspicuously matched her walking pace with Emilia and Geuse, Emilia quietly waved back to the housewives, whereupon the wives smiled with mischievous looks on their faces.

They walked in that manner for a while until the forest abruptly fell away and their destination, the lake, came into view.

“As usual, the air here is very refreshing. I feel like I’m in a better mood already.”

“That is because you are always carrying such weighty burdens, Lady Fortuna. You must stretch your wings once in a while. By all means, allow me to aid you in doing so.”

Fortuna put her things down on the lakeshore and made a little stretch as Geuse expressed his consideration for her. When he busily set aside a place for them to sit and made preparations for the picnic, Fortuna narrowed her eyes; then, as she gazed upon the scenery, she called out to Emilia.

“Today, I’m being treated not as the leader of my people but as an old little girl. I can’t relax like this. Hey, Emilia, say something, would…?”

“

As the corners of her eyes fell with relief, Fortuna flicked Emilia's forehead, then pulled her close against her own chest. She did not crouch for this; Emilia was simply leaning forward—they were, after all, roughly the same height.

"The two of you always get along so well. Watching it up close is truly enough to put a smile on my face."

"…Want to join in, Geuse?"

"Don't say stupid things. Geuse, go ahead and open the basket. It's a little early, but we shall have our meal, for our Princess demands it."

With that declaration, Fortuna kept holding Emilia close as they walked over to join Geuse. The basket's contents were spread atop a flat, grassy spot. Her mother was good at cooking over a fire, and this was her specialty.

Food grilled with herbs was one of Emilia's favorites, as well as —

"I am always humbled that you would share this with me… The flavor is simply irresistible."

With a *munch, munch* and a happy-looking face, Geuse stuffed his cheeks full of grilled-herb food. Fortuna's cooking specialty was nothing short of a feast to him, so it was guaranteed this was what they would have every time the trio went out for a picnic.

It was undeniable. Something was…stirring in her chest.

"Geuse, if you love Mom's cooking so much, you should just… live in the forest with us."

Emilia pushed that feeling back down and raised the possibility of a life together for the intimate couple. Instantly, Fortuna's face reddened. "E-Emilia…!" she cried.

"D-don't say such thoughtless things. It's very hard for Geuse, too. He has to thread his way through a busy schedule just to poke his head over here at all…"

"I am greatly pleased to hear you say this, Lady Emilia. Were it only possible. I, too, desire this from the bottom of my heart."

The nervousness on her mother's face was in stark contrast to Geuse's calm demeanor. But the echo of Geuse's words—*were it only possible* —left Emilia dissatisfied.

"If you want to do it, then just do it, not because it's 'possible.' If neither of you has a problem with it… Besides, no one's going to get in the way… Or am I in the way?"

"Not at all." "That is not so."

She voiced the concern that her being there was the reason the amiable pair could not be with each other. And since Fortuna and Geuse both denied it was so, she blurted out her next words without thinking.

“You two sure get along *really* nicely.”

“Oh, there you go again… Geuse, say something, would you?”

“Yes, you mustn’t, Lady Emilia. Lady Fortuna is someone with a very important duty. If one such as myself remains for too long, ill rumors shall arise and cause her trouble.”

“Rumors of Mom and Geuse…? I feel like it’s too late to stop those…”

Geuse’s poor defense made Emilia put a finger to her lips as she replied. Geuse looked like he had no idea to what she was referring. “I mean…,” went Emilia as she continued. “The aunties near home said we look like a happy family that gets along really well.”

“—! I was quite certain this was referring to Lady Emilia and Lady Fortuna only…”

“I expect nothing less from you, Geuse… But Mom understands, right?”

“

Fortuna wore her familiar exasperated look. However, that expression immediately fell away, changing into a smile she could not hold back.

"*Tee-hee*, ah-ha-ha. Oh, Emilia… Truly, you are a *really* cute girl."

"Ha-ha, Lady Emilia has… I see, she has grown up sound and well. Truly, a joyful thing."

"Well, of course she has. She's my daughter, my pride and joy. It goes without saying."

"Yes, so I see."

Watching the two laughing and looking at each other's smiling faces filled Emilia's chest with a palpable sense of warmth. From the bottom of her heart, she wanted to gaze at the scene for a long time, immersing herself in it.

—Probably because there was no greater happiness than this.

"…Emilia?"

When Fortuna suddenly called out to her, Emilia hurriedly covered her face with her hands. She belatedly realized she'd spontaneously broken into tears. "Aa," came her voice as she desperately tried to hold them back.

"I might've gotten a speck of dust in my eye. A *really* big speck of dust."

"That big? Are you all right?"

"I-I'm fine. I'm in completely tip-top shape. As much as that rock over there."

"That enormous boulder?! Are you truly all right?!"

"I said I'm fine!!"

Responding to the concerned pair, Emilia rubbed her eyes as she turned to face the lake.

"I'm going to wash my eyes out a bit. After, I think I'll go around the lake once."

"Make sure you don't drop your eyeballs by mistake. They're such a pretty color… Pretty violet eyes, just like Brother's."

"Well, Mom's eyes are just as pretty."

Perhaps Fortuna never considered that, for Emilia's reply took her completely by surprise. Seeing that the unusual side of hers made Geuse laugh, Emilia laughed as well.

She kept laughing as she advanced toward the lake. Then she glanced back, looking at Fortuna and Geuse.

"Get along nicely and wait, okay? And always, always

reaaaaally get along.”

“Yes, yes, you worrywart. But don’t make us wait too long. That would put me in a serious bind.”

“No, there is no need to hurry. Take your time. We shall wait for as long as is required, Lady Emilia.”

With the smiling pair—With her parents seeing her off, Emilia took a deep breath.

Then, unable to hold it in any longer, she turned around, looked straight at the two of them, and parted her lips once more.

“—I love you both.”

3

—From a plateau with a view of the entire lake, Emilia stood, gently caressed by the wind.

“

tilting his head.

"Today Lord Archbishop was supposed to come to the forest, yes? Weren't you with…? Ahhh, isn't that him over there? Er, did you give them some time alone, by any chance?"

"…Mm, that's right. What do you think of them, Archi?"

"I think they're a good match. Everyone in the forest thinks so, too. Lady Fortuna is so strict with herself, even though we would prefer it if she thought of her own happiness more…"

As he shared those thoughts, Archi reeled in shock, for he had caught sight of Emilia's wet eyes and the tears ready to spill out from them.

"Ah, um, Emilia, it's not… It's all right! Even if Lady Fortuna and Lord Archbishop were joined together, they would never forsake you!"

"…It's not that, stupid."

"Not that, huh…? Ahhh, then, er, how about this? Certainly, it might be difficult right now, and I do not know how many years must pass in the meantime, but someday, both of them will—"

"—Time."

As Archi hurriedly tried to comfort her, Emilia lifted her head, lips quivering.

If they'd had time, the distance between Fortuna and Geuse would have narrowed. To be blunt, the current speed of progress seemed no faster than a snail's pace, but eventually, the day would surely come when they would be together.

When that day came, everyone in the forest would celebrate. Of course, Emilia would celebrate most of all, and if possible, she wanted not only the people of the forest but the people of the entire world to celebrate the couple.

That would be a world of peace, of tranquility, of freedom in all things, where everyone could smile together—

"—But that world doesn't exist."

Lowering her eyes rimmed with long eyelashes, Emilia touched her hair ornament as she murmured—the floral hair ornament she had inherited from her mother, of which two should not exist in that world.

Her mother, all dressed up and waiting for her on the lakeshore, wore the very same hair ornament.

In other words, this was a place apart from the forest that had already met its snowy end, an unknowable, idealized future—

“…Looking at this unknowable present, have you not thought, *I want to live here*?”

“Archi…”

“Here, I, Lady Fortuna, Lord Archbishop, and everyone else are living safe and sound. No tragedy will ever befall this place. It is a happy world. Emilia, you could have a good life here, too, free of worry and hurt.”

To Emilia, who had realized this was a false world, Archi raised a gentle plea for her not to make such a sad face. That he found nothing suspect with his own theory was proof itself that this world was a sham.

It would have been a lie to claim his plea, Archi’s plea, didn’t sway her heart.

“Surely, you want the two of them to be happy. Surely, you want to live here to see it. After all, this is your ideal present…the future you yourself desired.”

“The future that I… Yes, I think you’re right. I’m sure you are.”

She wanted Fortuna to be happy. She wanted Geuse to make her mother happy.

If only everyone in the forest could smile together, if only she could get along nicely with Archi, to always be in such a world of happiness.

—If only she could pretend not to know, to somehow forget her mother’s tragic demise and Geuse’s unspeakable grief.

“Lady Fortuna has already passed away. Lord Archbishop’s well-being or lack thereof is unknown. Everyone in the forest has been turned to statues of ice.”

“…Yeah.”

“Our homeland has been frozen over, blocked off to all outsiders, and now you have even parted ways with the spirit who was like family to you.”

“

“Even though you could be happy here… Even though you wanted this world… You poor thing…”

—all he wanted was for Emilia to be happy, to be at peace.

It was exactly as he’d said. This was a world that existed for no reason other than to make Emilia happy…

“…Sorry, Archi.”

“—Why do you desire a future that will hurt you so much?”

“I don’t want to be hurt. I’m searching for a future where I don’t have to be hurt, where I don’t have to run, hide, or push things away, where I can hold hands with others.”

“And the wounds you suffer? The pain? What you have lost will never return. Will you search for such a thing even so?”

“

she wanted to do everything she could for the people she wanted to be with—for the people inside and outside the forest, for those who once walked alongside her and for those who would stand by her from now on.

“I want those people to think I look cool. I want to reach my hand out to the others the way so many people assured me that things would be all right.”

It was time for the girl who had always been saved by others to start saving them.

The boy who always endured so much for Emilia’s sake had put his trust in her, promising that everything would turn out all right in the end.

—That was why Emilia would live in the outside world.

“I’m all right. I’m not afraid of the outside world. I’m not afraid of the future.”

“

feel the depth of his love. Just how many times had she been protected, and just how much love and tranquility had she received?

“Thank you, Big Brother.”

All of Emilia’s and Archi’s feelings were encapsulated in the smiles they exchanged.

Then she turned her back to him, standing atop the cliff once more. From that vantage point, she could see Fortuna and Geuse in the distance, as well as the surface of the lake immediately beneath her.

“

Emilia's memory of being hated by her during the course of the first Trial was still fresh. She'd half given up on hearing her voice in that world, let alone seeing her face.

But there, the Witch appeared in that transient world at the very, very end, and her voice trembled.

"Echidna…?"

Turning around, Emilia faced the Witch head-on. That same moment, Emilia wished she hadn't. When she turned around, there stood Echidna, her expression so raw, it made Emilia regret seeing it.

—For Echidna was simply standing there, staring at Emilia with a face ready to break into tears.

"I hate you—I just…hate you."

"

century had passed—and in all that time, Emilia had never once set eyes upon her grown-up self.

The reason was simple. She was simply…afraid. She was too afraid to look.

When she awoke, the aging her body had undergone conflicted with the memories she had lost. Her clumsy, unfamiliar body terrified her immature heart, and the way the people living close to the forest treated her drove that fear deeper still.

Her features inevitably drew comparisons to the Witch of Jealousy, and Emilia spent that time in misfortune. This made people uneasy, so they persecuted her, causing her to harbor even greater fear than before.

She deliberately avoided mirrors, and she'd trained herself to not even look at the reflective surface of water.

—As part of her contract with Puck, he picked how Emilia would groom herself each day.

Normally, he hid everything under his aloof, frivolous demeanor, but this, too, was actually all to protect Emilia's fragile heart from reopening old wounds.

"Truly, just how much have people been protecting me…?"

How much had she failed to notice while she'd been sulking all on her own?

The time she'd spent ignoring the love others gave her had finally come to an end.

"—!"

With resolve in her heart, Emilia closed her eyes, and moments later, her feet left the ground.

In an instant, gravity dragged her floating body downward, pulling her into a fall upside down. The rushing wind entwined her long silver hair around her body. Her figure was perfectly straight as she plunged headfirst—hurtling toward the water below.

She felt goose bumps on her skin. Sensing the surface of the water was close by, Emilia opened her eyes.

It was just in time for her to drink in the sight of the silver-haired, violet-eyed girl reflected by the clear lake's surface.

It was as if she was resolved to greet the end of the world head-on. Then, quietly, she widened her eyes further.

"—Huh."

A disappointed voice trickled out.

Her face reflected in the water, the face of the little girl who

had grown so big, drew nearer and nearer with every passing moment.

Emilia let out a soft sigh and muttered.

“That’s too bad. I look less like Mom than I thought…”

An instant after that sulky murmur, Emilia crashed into the watery mirror.

She would never let go of the happiness she found. However, the world of dreams from which she had to depart had finally come to an end…

4

—Neither the cold nor the impact of breaking the water’s surface receded when Emilia’s mind returned to reality.

When she came to, the first thing she saw was the small, cold room in the dimly lit tomb. Lying upon her side, Emilia blinked again and again, thinking back to the Trial that had ended a moment before.

Perhaps it had been an illusion. The scene was one that could have existed, and that fact made her chest throb.

“My feelings for Mom, for Dad…for Big Brother and everyone else I hold dear—those haven’t changed.”

If anything, her feelings for them had only deepened and grown stronger. She kept these emotions stored away in her heart, and she would carry them with her forevermore.

Her resolve had crystallized. Both of Echidna’s Trials had given her something precious.

The words of thanks she offered the Witch were not false in any way.

“…With this, the second Trial is over. That’s good, right?”

As she rose to her feet, Emilia set aside her questions about Echidna’s final actions for later.

There was a tangible sense of accomplishment, and judging from the look of the Witch as she departed, it was no mistake to think the second Trial had indeed ended. She had not so much overcome it as she had seen things through to the end.

“

Emilia at the entrance to the tomb was not a lone maid but a great throng of people.

“Ah, she’s come out!”

Someone noticed the surprised Emilia and raised a cry. Instantly, the crowd shifted their gazes toward her as one, and the sheer force of it made Emilia wince. But she recognized them instantly.

There stood the people of Earlham Village who had evacuated to the Sanctuary and taken shelter at the Cathedral.

Their return to their homes had been delayed, now hinging on the lifting of the Sanctuary’s barrier. It was none other than Emilia who had promised she would definitely free them.

Still unable to make good on her promise just yet, Emilia held her breath. She fully expected them to accuse her of being all talk and no substance. And yet—

“It’s good you are safe and sound!” “Were you hurt at all?” “Simply going in there put our lord at death’s door!”

“

a single reason for them to remain.

The villagers already knew that. Emilia had heard from Ram that Subaru and company explained it to them prior to leaving for the mansion.

Therefore, there was no reason for them to await Emilia's success or failure in the Trials. However—

"Master Subaru? Hey, what did he tell us anyway?"

"Oh? I wonder. Lately, I have been quite forgetful. I simply can't recall."

"Goodness, the way you said that seemed so real that it honestly scared me for a minute. Well, not that it isn't true…"

Looking at one another's faces, the villagers began exchanging unbelievable words. It was not simply one or two people, either. Every last person had joined in on the act, pretending like they had no idea what Emilia was talking about.

Naturally, Emilia was agape at such transparent behavior. They were all clearly playing dumb, acting as if this was the first they'd heard of it. As for the reason why, Emilia just couldn't understa—

"—And so, Lady Emilia, we will wait here as promised."

"—!"

"We cannot return to the village until Lady Emilia has lifted the barrier. We're not budging from that one bit."

The old woman with a stooped hip who served as head of Earlham Village spoke those words with a smiling face. Emilia drew in her breath. By this point, even someone as slow on the uptake as Emilia could understand what their intention was.

All of them were waiting for her to fulfill her promise. No doubt they wanted to return to their families without a moment to spare, but they were suppressing that urge in order to honor their promise to her.

That was because Emilia had sworn to do the same for these very people.

"Besides, we are not the only ones expecting much from Lady Emilia's efforts."

"Eh…?"

As Emilia, deeply moved by the unexpected turn of events, felt her chest grow hot, the elderly woman made a mischievous smile as she nodded. When Emilia looked over, drawn by the gesture, the people of Earlham Village were all lined up—and behind them, with a swaying of the thickets, she saw even more people entering

the clearing.

Somehow, the group seemed to be walking hesitantly, and at their head stood a girl with long pink hair, a black robe draped over her, and a staff in hand.

"Miss Ryuzu and…the people of the Sanctuary?"

"—From the looks of things, it would seem that you have returned after completing the second Trial."

Lining up beside the head of Earlham Village, Ryuzu sighed as if to say, *We made it in time*. Everyone present gathered together into two groups, dividing the open ground up between them.

Emilia, who had a view of the whole scene from her vantage point atop the stairs of the tomb, was deeply moved, letting out an "ah."

"There were this many people living in the Sanctuary?"

She'd heard there were maybe fifty Earlham Village evacuees who had taken shelter here. The residents of the Sanctuary in the clearing numbered just as many, about as much as a very large family, bringing the total number of souls gathered in this place to about a hundred.

Yet, despite that, in all the time Emilia had spent here, she had practically never come face-to-face with any Sanctuary residents beyond Ryuzu and Garfiel, let alone spoken to any of them.

"Please know that is no fault of yours, Lady Emilia. It was the residents' will… Really, it was my own stubbornness that prevented me from allowing you to meet the residents."

"Miss Ryuzu…"

"Lady Emilia, you have done well to have overcome the Trial. We are grateful for this. And…"

Bowing her head deeply, Ryuzu had said exactly what Emilia had guessed she would. Then Ryuzu glanced at the elderly woman standing beside her.

"…After hearing from Young Gar and the villagers here… listening to both the residents of this place and outsiders alike, I, too, have finally been able to rouse these old bones. I suppose you might fault me as an opportunist."

"…I'm not one to talk about anyone having doubts and being stuck in place. I spent about a hundred years dozing off, after all."

"Still, our obstinacy has lasted generation after generation across four centuries, so I will call us even."

Unable to bear the sight of that downcast face, Emilia offered

some joking words, which seemed to help Ryuzu relax. She was acting like Subaru. This was how he usually lightened the mood during weighty occasions.

“I understand what Garfiel probably spoke about…but was everyone else able to hold discussions with the people of the Sanctuary as well?”

“Nothing quite so grand. Just living in the same place naturally leads people to build relationships. We elderly often have spare time to exchange words while doing the cooking and the laundry.”

“And so we elderly with too much time on our hands spoke about various things. I have long lived in the Sanctuary…yet, I have never had a chance to exchange words with an outsider quite like this.”

Musing out loud, Ryuzu and the Earlham Village head turned to each other, wearing little smiles. Externally, they didn’t look even remotely the same age, but to Emilia’s eyes, it seemed like an exchange between old friends.

And Emilia thought this was a powerful, deep, and most precious thing.

“Lady Emilia… May we have a few words with you?”

“Y-yes.”

Then someone raised their hand and stepped forward. He was a resident from the Sanctuary, a man with a head full of bestial hair and ever-so-slightly-canine teeth—as someone who lived here, he was undoubtedly a half-blood himself.

The man, whose age she would put at thirty thereabouts, bowed his head with a rather tense expression on his face.

“To be honest, I… No, we…still haven’t decided in our hearts.”

“

establishment of the Sanctuary four centuries prior.

Lifting the barrier meant losing something that they had always taken for granted. How much did this mean to them? In terms of taking something for granted, Puck had been the closest comparison Emilia had.

To Emilia, his sudden departure was the last thing she wanted. It was only natural that the residents of the Sanctuary were just as reluctant to have such a thing imposed on them by others.

“If Master Roswaal is looking after us even on the outside, how would that be any different from us living here? I’d always thought maybe we don’t need to change.”

“…Yeah.”

“However.”

Lowering her eyes, Emilia took in the man’s words. She awaited more with a gloomy heart.

When she looked back, the man had stretched and straightened his back, his tense cheeks hardening as he continued.

“However… All of us heard Garfiel’s—heard that little kid’s angry voice.”

“

Emilia was silent as she received the man's—No, it was not the man alone, but the gazes from all the various people behind him were trained upon her. Receiving these, Emilia stood straight and strong.

"—I understand. I'm certain I will see this through. When that time comes, we can speak properly."

"Yes, it's a promise. Actually, for me and the rest to be shunning anyone based on their looks and position without even talking ain't exactly the best—*Wahyah!*"

As the man deeply bowed, something sent him leaping into the air. When Emilia looked harder, the cause was Ryuzu, who was standing beside him and had suddenly dug her nails into his side. The man gave an objecting look as Ryuzu laughed at the top of her lungs.

"Too long, too serious, and midway through, you switched from *us* to *me*. Shame on you, shame."

"…I-I'm very sorry, Elder."

"Either way, our current point of view is as he said just now. This, too… Mm? What is the matter?"

Ryuzu was in the midst of lightly teasing the man when the wide-eyed Emilia tilted her head.

"Er… Miss Ryuzu, it's a little surprising to hear someone call you Elder like that."

"Ahhh—"

"And I was thinking, *Wow, I really haven't seen her speaking with anyone except Garfiel, have I…?*"

Think about that, went Emilia, sticking her tongue out. Ryuzu, taken aback, looked at the man's face, and he, hers. From there, they let up voices of "Kwa-ha-ha-ha!" and laughed.

The laugh was not merely between Ryuzu and the man; it spread to the various people of the Sanctuary and even the residents of Earlham Village. For a time, the entire clearing was filled with laughter.

"Somehow, it doesn't seem quite right to laugh…but, mm, Miss Ryuzu, thank you. Also, Miss Milde, it seems like you *really* put some work into this."

"—Lady Emilia, you remembered my name?"

As Emilia spoke words of thanks, the elderly woman beside Ryuzu—Milde Earlham—made a surprised face. Seeing this, Emilia went "mm-hmm" and puffed out her chest. "I may not look like it,

but I am in the middle of studying to become king. Remembering names is the least I can do."

"I do not believe a king needs to remember the name of each and every subject, but…"

"You've probably been dealing with kings with poor memory. I'm very good at learning things."

Hearing Emilia's reply, Milde slightly narrowed her eyes; then she offered a deep bow.

Glancing sidelong at this, Ryuzu went, "Now then," indicating the tomb with her chin. "Lady Emilia, I am pleased that we could be of service to you… Next is the final Trial, but…"

"Yes, I intend to challenge it immediately. Well, I was intending to… Miss Ryuzu, do you know where Ram is?"

The impact of being greeted by such a large throng the instant she exited the tomb temporarily forced it from her mind, but as far as her eyes could see, Ram was nowhere to be found.

Emilia had wanted to inform the girl who'd motivated her to break through the Trial that she had finally found some success, but…

"…Ram is attending to a duty she cannot afford to shirk. She left a message, praying for your good fortune. She said, *Lady Emilia must do what only she can do, and Ram must do the same. Let us do our very best.*"

Ryuzu mimicked Ram's way of speaking, drawing a strained smile onto Emilia's face. It was just like her to say something like that.

Ram's duty was no doubt connected to the feelings that she had conveyed in her request to Emilia. And when she thought how Ram might fulfill that duty, there was a slight throbbing in her chest.

Pushing that feeling down, Emilia chose to trust Ram, just as Ram had chosen to trust Emilia.

"…I have to say, though, no one waited for me to come back at all. Not Subaru, not Ram…"

"Oh-ho, I see how that would sour your mood. It is a pity those you care deeply for are not present. If this pitiful old face is good enough for you, I'll wait right here until you return again."

"Okaaay—I guess it's time."

Emilia had begun to pout, but after hearing Ryuzu's response, she smiled and then turned.

Right before her, the entrance to the tomb awaited. She entered

without any hesitation.

“Well, I’m off.”

Various voices, from the residents of the Sanctuary and Earlham Village alike, called out after her.

There were so many expectations pushing her forward—more than the first time and more than the second. Carrying these alongside the powerful resolve now residing within her, she walked toward the back of the tomb.

And then—

“—Face the calamity that shall come.”

—the third Trial came.

CHAPTER 3

—GUILTYLOWE, BLACK KING OF THE FOREST, STRIKES!!

1

—With every clash of steel against steel, there was a string of high-pitched sounds that seemed to be a woman's cries.

"Gaaaaaa—!!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Marvelous! Marvelous! Marvelousmarvelousmarvelous!"

Flipping her body around like she was dancing, she aimed a curved blade at his vitals with no fixed path, flashing from up, down, right, and left. It almost seemed like some sort of extreme training, but every blow landed without any warning, infused with enough power to instantly end his life.

The tip of the bent blade rent the air, surpassing sound as it swung with godlike speed.

The seemingly supernatural, murderous technique was being countered by Garfiel's own superhuman skill.

Using the silver-colored shields attached to both arms, he chose to deflect rather than block the incoming blade. He kept redirecting the force of the woman's attacks skyward, creating openings for counterattacks so he stood a chance at reeling in victory by force.

Even that very moment, he guided a powerful blow aimed at his neck off to the side before sending a kick straight into the woman's torso. Had Garfiel's kick connected cleanly, it would have undoubtedly ruptured all her internal organs. But—

"I've already seen that one."

—the woman's eyesight was truly frightening, surpassing all common sense.

Her whisper was not a joke or a taunt, either. Every technique

she witnessed in battle did not work a second time. Having already foreseen this *second* straight kick, the woman avoided it with minimal movement as she lined up her next attack: a backward slash with her blade.

That blow, apparently intended to serve as punishment for foolishly resorting to the same technique a second time while fighting a powerful foe, hit its mark.

"Rrrrraaa!!"

In that same instant, Garfiel's foolish kick slammed right into the woman's face.

"—Ngh!"

She bit down to suppress the groan of pain that threatened to escape from the back of her throat. Her knife had entered his right foot, carving his flesh all the way up to his femur. If he'd been even slightly slower, she would've no doubt sliced off the entire leg. But for that price, Garfiel had landed a clean blow on the woman.

In the battle up to that point, Garfiel had grown to admire—and trust—the skill of Elsa, his foe.

The excellence of her technique, her overwhelming combat intuition, the physical abilities she'd honed, and the impossibly fine control over her own body—few could claim to be as strong as this woman. He was certain that if he showed her the same technique twice, she'd definitely see right through it. It was this absolute trust in her ability that allowed Garfiel to land a direct hit on her.

He was sure he'd torn the woman's sultry face. Even if it did not end her life, it would leave her gravely wounded and unable to continue combat. But Garfiel did not let his guard down. After all—

"—Aaagh, that hurt, and quite a bit. Makes me appreciate being alive."

"Damn it, this ain't no joke. What is that body of yours made out of?"

As Garfiel sighed, Elsa let out a heated breath of excitement. She was touching her left hand to her face as if to suppress the bleeding, and when she slowly lowered it, anyone watching would have expected a wound underneath terrible enough to make the faint of heart avert their eyes. But it was not so.

When she removed her left hand, Elsa revealed her face didn't even have a scratch, let alone any bleeding.

"The general called ya a woman who wouldn't die even if one killed her…but this is just messed up."

“I suppose it is. Even I feel slightly apologetic about my physical nature. It seems to be robbing everything you do of all meaning… I wonder, do you hate women like me?”

Hearing how disconcerted Garfiel was made Elsa slightly incline her head. The tone of the question made Garfiel abruptly furrow his brows.

It was slight, minute, but he felt some part of Elsa’s tone of voice was filled with sadness.

“Even as I move about, my wounds heal, and I feel neither pain nor fatigue, allowing me to continue fighting without limit. Do you feel fighting such a woman lacks any meaning? I wonder, do you really think of me as someone you can test the results of your training against?”

“—Hell if I care.”

The throwaway tone of Garfiel’s voice made Elsa widen her eyes in apparent surprise. She blinked hard, which momentarily made her seem much younger. Garfiel crinkled his nose as he spoke again.

“You’re my enemy. And me, I’m the super-strongest shield who’s been assigned the toughest enemy. I got the general and the woman I fell for expectin’ a lot from me. I ain’t givin’ up from a little setback like this.”

“You…”

“I’m gonna blow you away, Elsa Gramhilde. Don’t matter how many times ya come back.”

Baring his fangs and keeping his legs wide apart, Garfiel adopted a fighting stance as he howled.

Garfiel’s caustic words left Elsa silent for a time. She let her refined eyelashes fall just a tiny bit as she touched a hand to her own mouth—he heard a laughing voice.

“Huh? The hell are you laughin’ at?!”

“*Tee-hee…!* Ah, er, I am quite sorry. I heard some unexpected words, so I could not help but find them amusing… Yes, you seem to be a very good boy.”

“Don’t treat me like some little kid. Me, I’m a fine man. A grown male.”

“Oh really now? You hardly look fully developed to me, either as an adult or a man…”

As Elsa relaxed her cheeks, her ridicule drew a sour snort out of Garfiel.

Garfiel couldn't read Elsa's emotions. To be blunt, he wasn't interested in them. That moment, what was important to him was fulfilling his role—by beating the opponent before his eyes to a pulp.

—In so doing, he would prove the Sanctuary's mightiest shield could fulfill that role even in the outside world.

"You truly are marvelous… But that makes this more the pity."

"The hell you talkin' about?!"

"Right now, your attention is directed toward me and nothing else. I wonder, how are your older sister and the others faring? You've been wondering the whole time, haven't you?"

Elsa's comment concerned Frederica as well as Subaru and Otto as they scurried across the mansion.

She wasn't wrong. Certainly, Garfiel was worried for his friends. He could not deny that they'd remained in the corner of his mind throughout the fight.

"I wonder, if the cause of your fear was cut away, would you look at me and only me? —In any case, your friends cannot escape from this mansion. You've realized this, too, haven't you?"

"…Seems like there are demon beasts crawlin' all over this place. The work of your little helper, huh?"

"My little sister. So long as her perimeter is intact, there is no way to escape. She worked hard and brought an entire horde of demon beasts. At this point, everyone could very well have been eaten down to the last morsel."

The entirety of Roswaal Manor was buried in disgusting scents and auras.

He'd heard beforehand of the existence of a Beast Master who controlled demon beasts. Subaru and company must have tried using that repel crystal for barriers as a countermeasure, but the beasts still remained in the mansion that very moment. He knew from the faint tremors reaching his eardrums and what he could pick up from their auras.

In other words, some kind of unforeseen problem had arisen. It no doubt had something to do with Elsa's little sister, the Beast Master he had yet to personally lay eyes on. The more he thought about it, the deeper he sank into worry.

"Really, you want to rush over to your friends this very moment, don't you? Not that I'll let you…but if the nervousness is dulling your fangs, that is very, very disappointing."

Garfiel, too, understood a warrior's desire to battle an enemy at their finest. But Elsa was different. She thought like a huntress, using every power at her disposal to take down her prey.

Considering her way of thinking, she probably thought the current situation put Garfiel at a disadvantage.

—But that was completely off the mark.

"Don't get the wrong idea, lady."

"Am I wrong?"

"You just don't get it. Demon beasts are wanderin' around, yeah? And what, you think I gotta go save 'em or somethin'? Stupid crap like that ain't gonna stop the general."

Garfiel, supposedly unable to fight at full strength out of worry for his friends, seethed with an uncontainable heat that blazed within him.

He boldly stepped forward, baring his fangs as he closed the distance between him and Elsa.

"The general and his crew are the ones who gave me a royal poundin'. No matter how many demon beasts get in their way, they'll just laugh and kill 'em all!!"

2

"Nowaynowaynoway seriously no way seriouslynoway, we're totally done for…!"

Practically out of breath, Subaru collapsed as he rambled in a tearful voice.

He put Rem, who was on his back, over his knees, breathing raggedly as he lay low on the first floor of the mansion. Otto and Petra were right beside him, both completely exhausted.

—In that moonlit corridor, their group had encountered the demon beast Guiltylowe, and combat had ensued.

Combat was a poor word to describe it. There was no way that Subaru and his current companions could land a blow on such a beast, so there had been no option but instantly fleeing. They'd tumbled into the nearest room, and seizing the opportunity when the monster's huge frame got stuck in the entrance, they fled out the window into the yard, putting some distance between them and their hunter.

From there, they'd returned to the mansion via a different room, but—

“Th-that demon beast… Is it biding its time and patrolling the entire building…?”

“It may have been assigned to guard this position… When we poked our heads out earlier, it was right here in the main wing. Combining the magic stones I had on hand with a spell to muffle our footsteps allowed us to somehow get away, but…”

Even when resorting to such tricks to throw the monstrous guard off their trail, it would be difficult to avoid encountering the creature if they wanted to secure a reliable escape route.

In addition to the abominable Guiltylowe, there were numerous demon beasts milling about the mansion. These lesser creatures could be driven off with repel stones, but if they encountered any opposition, the Guiltylowe would undoubtedly notice—leaving them in a vicious cycle.

“This is what I get for operating separately from Garfiel, huh…?”

“Please do not speak such timid words. After all, this very moment, Garfiel may well be howling in high spirits that we must be all right. We should at least respond with expectations equal to his.”

“You’re so big on returning favors. You really aren’t cut out to be a merchant…”

Hearing these words from Otto, who was in the best physical condition among them, Subaru flashed a wry smile as he stood up with renewed resolve.

Returning Rem to his back, he found her body despairingly light. Carrying an unconscious person was a heavy burden, a fact that he’d personally experienced in this world several times over, but in her current state, Rem was the exception to the rule.

He couldn’t feel her warmth or weight or much of anything at all. Her tenuous hold on existence even affected her physical body. Only the faint sounds of her heart and her sleeping breaths told him that she truly existed in her current state.

If she fell off his back, he probably wouldn’t even notice. Fearful of this exact possibility, he put even more strength into supporting Rem’s body.

“Subaru…”

Petra moved closer to him, gently tugging on his sleeve with a somber expression.

Petra, still so very young, had resolutely raced alongside them

throughout the night of their lives without a single word of complaint despite the great danger.

“A-are you all right?”

Her pink lips were pursed as she posed a question—not out of concern for her own life but with words of concern for Subaru, so earnestly bearing Rem on his back, even as his own breaths ran ragged.

Petra’s feelings were like a healing salve to Subaru. Without such salvation, he would never have been even half as determined to go on.

Despair wouldn’t get them out of their predicament. Subaru Natsuki rose back to his feet.

“Have you thought of something?”

Perhaps seeing something in Subaru’s expression, Otto closed one eye and questioned him so. He didn’t even consider disguising the expectations and trust in the tone of his voice and his gaze.

“

“We’re short on martial and magical ability—so it’s finally time for me to put my unparalleled modern knowledge to good use.”

3

At first, the demon beast—Guiltylowe, the Black King of the Forest—picked up a faint noise.

“

The one making the footsteps was right around the corner. The king swung a claw just beyond that corner, a single blow that would rend the prey's back apart, throwing its corpse to the ground, and expose its humiliation in full. However—

"—?"

Right after swinging its claw, the Guiltylowe paused, sensing something was off. The presence it was certain was there had vanished, and the only one standing in the corridor was the great and dignified king.

The foolish, fragile, disgustingly weak prey had vanished, nowhere to be found.

—A moment later, another sound of shoes reached its ears, and the Guiltylowe ferociously took up its pursuit once more.

Its target was using the stairs, heading for the floor below. The sound of fleeing, running footsteps made the Guiltylowe reassess its prey ever so slightly—it had gone from intolerably weak to a fool worthy of killing.

If its quarry had merely been running wildly, the beast would have settled for ending things with a single claw swipe, cruelly slashing the fool apart. However, this prey had refused the king's mercy, willingly rejecting a quick death—and so it would die a thousand deaths instead.

The Guiltylowe kicked off the wall of a landing, its huge frame seemingly dancing as it leaped down the stairs. The hulking monster gave chase, reaching the second floor before going down one more, pursuing its prey to the lowest floor.

In the distance, somewhere beyond the building, it heard the voice of its master trying to call it back.

"

Up ahead, it heard the sound of a door closing. The Guiltylowe did not hesitate to force it open by slamming its body home. This sent the door flying with great ease, and the Guiltylowe was greeted by a particularly spacious room.

It was not a small, cramped room like the stupid, ignorant prey had fled into earlier. It was a spacious room where the Guiltylowe could swing its claws and leap around with its giant frame to its heart's content.

Perhaps the prey was finally invoking the last of its spirit to challenge the Guiltylowe to a duel. However, the prey was nowhere to be seen, and at the back of the room, the monster heard the sound of yet another door closing—the door of an entrance separate from the one it had destroyed, and connecting the guest room to a smaller one, had shut.

In the end, that is all you have, thought the Guiltylowe, genuinely disappointed. The guest room came with a large table with a white cloth over it and, atop that, a row of lit candles. The flickering flames illuminated the king's red face as, with heavy steps, it headed for the little room in back.

Its vile tail, like a great serpent, sharply swung about, easily slicing the wooden door apart. Savagely springing its forelegs up, the Guiltylowe drew in its breath; it then pushed in with a roar.

"

Then it heard that voice, not from the small room but from the previous, wide room.

“Eat the power of science, baby—Dust Explosion!”

After a brief noise, it threw something into the small room.

Something flickered red within the Guiltylowe’s nearly all-white field of vision—it was one of the candles from the guest room. The candle struck the wall, and for a moment, the reddish flame glowed brighter as it landed upon the floor.

“H-huh…?”

But…that was all that happened.

The candle remained on the floor, showing no further sign of change. The one who had thrown it was frozen in place and sounded like there’d been a miscalculation.

—The Guiltylowe’s regal instincts screamed this was a golden opportunity.

Something had put its opponent into a disadvantageous state. Even if that had not been the case, surely this trick would have been insufficient to put the Guiltylowe in peril—Nay, it would not underestimate its foe further. It would utilize every store of power.

It would rend its prey apart, flay its skin, and feast in victory on the flesh and blood—

“Aghhh, that’s why we told you! We shouldn’t have tried this nonsensical method!”

“Normally, it’s faster to do it this way!!”

The instant it leaped out of the little room, the Guiltylowe picked up a high-pitched voice and an even higher-pitched voice. Clearly different from the prey it had spotted earlier—and the instant after it had that realization, a large quantity of something poured down from overhead.

It was a liquid. Certainly not water, and it felt slippery to the touch. Bathed in the yellowish fluid, the king felt its fangs trembling at having its proud black mane tarnished. However, it had the luxury to consider this for but a single instant.

“This is the personal merchandise of Otto Suwen—oil bought with the entirety of his life savings! —How do you like my wares?!”

As the prey shouted with joy, the king—the Guiltylowe—had no way to stop what came next.

—The candles ignited the oil that had drenched the entirety of its body, wreathing the king with abominable flames.

“

The Black King of the Forest had left the wilds, gaining a master, and, to the very end, wondered about the throne it had left vacant.

Still unaware of what had defeated it, the demon beast was enveloped by flame the same color as its burning humiliation, scorching its body black, torching it until it had been reduced to ash.

4

"So you can throw the sound of just footsteps, eliminate scents… Little tricks like that are all your magic can do?"

"…Having you belittle them weighs upon my mind, but I am impressed you remember such a thing. That said, will these spells prove useful? At most, they can make an opponent turn their head for but a single instant."

"Super-useful. We can use this to lure it into the trap… After that, I'll use the power of science to blow it away."

"You certainly seem extremely confident, but this so-called power of science…"

"A dust explosion, the strongest trick in the book. Using foodstuffs makes it really simple to boot. With a bit of flour and an open flame, it'll work great. From what I know, it's guaranteed to send a single monster flying."

"We went along with your plan because you sounded so confident, and now look at what's happened!"

"Oh, shaddap! Scientific progress comes with sacrifices, you know! Damn, why'd it fail? Not enough dust, not enough flame… Or do the laws of physics in this world just not work the same way?"

"Arghhh! Stop talking about that and keep up! Ack, it's no good! Nooo!!"

With Subaru and Otto angrily yelling at each other, Petra scolded them with a desperate look on her face.

The noisy trio was being illuminated by the brilliant light of red flames. That was only natural, for at present, they were doing their best to put out the fire in the dining hall—however, the flames seemed to be only getting stronger.

"You used too much oil, damn it! You sure as hell spread it

around enough. How'd you plan on putting it out?!"

"As if anyone can hunt down such a huge demon beast while holding back! In the first place, it'd be the same result whether I used it all up or not! You're buying every last drop either way!"

"Both of you, this isn't the time!! We can't put it out! Let's run!"

With a frustrated look on his face, Subaru hurled the tablecloth, which had also caught on fire, into the quickly growing flames. There was no sign of the inferno in the pantry burning itself out. It had already spread to quite a bit of the dining hall, and black smoke began to seep out.

"We managed to defeat the demon beast, but the cost we paid is too high…"

The source of the flames was the black and charred demon beast—the Guiltylowe. Just as they'd planned, Otto's sneaky magic had led it downstairs, where they used a dust explosion in the pantry to bring it down—or not, since the dust explosion had failed. Instead, Otto had secured their victory by using his stock of oil to burn the thing to death.

The beast was a muscle-brain befitting its enormous frame, especially considering how it never suspected a thing as it fell into the trap. But because it flailed around wildly as it died, the flames had transferred to everything around it, completely setting the mansion on fire.

"This isn't a repair job anymore. It's a tear-down-and-rebuild job…"

"Is this really the time?! Let's run! Before we lose the stairs!"

"Quickly! Quickly!!"

Subaru found it surreal to watch the familiar sights and spaces catch on fire as the other two grabbed him by his sleeves and dragged him off. Pulled by the pair, Subaru readjusted Rem on his back as they ran from the burning dining hall.

Otto and Petra used repel stones to drive away any demon beasts that appeared along the way. There were also signs that demon beasts were fleeing the building, instinctively fearful of black smoke and fire.

"But what if Garfiel burns to death from this?!"

"Without the Guiltylowe prowling around, Garfiel can escape, too! Besides, surely he can send demon beasts packing and leap out of the building all by himself, even without using the escape route!"

Subaru was trembling from unwittingly wrecking the entire

battlefield, but even in that situation, Otto remained as clever as ever. Thanks to that, they arrived at the upper floor in good order.

Fortunately, no other demon beasts immune to the effects of the repel stone appeared. Subaru and company fled into the study, and Petra operated the mechanism on the bookshelf on the wall—slowly, making a sound, the bookshelf moved, and the hidden passage heading underground, linked to the outside, revealed itself.

"We did it! Subaru! It's the hidden passage… With this, we can get out of here!!"

"Yeah, I suppose so… If you head down to the bottom of these stairs and follow the passage, you can escape outside. The exit will be well outside the perimeter. That just leaves…here, Otto, take Rem."

"Yes, I understand. I will take very good care of her."

Nodding to Petra, who was overjoyed they had made it, Subaru turned his back to Otto next. Then he slowly, gently passed Rem from his back onto Otto's. His movements were careful, so as not to let her fall.

"Do *not* drop her. Do *not* let her get hurt. And do *not* touch her in strange ways."

"Setting your concerns aside, your possessiveness comes across as quite bothersome!"

"H-hey, you two… Why are you…talking like that?"

With Otto now carrying Rem on his back, Subaru flippantly warned to be careful. Hearing this exchange, Petra raised a question with a worried face.

"From the way you're talking right now…it sounds like Subaru isn't coming with us…"

"—Mm, that's just how it is. Sorry, but I can't run with you. From this point on, I gotta go it alone."

"Why?!"

When Subaru confirmed her suspicions, Petra's face paled as she clung to him.

"Let's run already! The mansion's on fire, and it'll just make more trouble for Miss Frederica! There's still a lot of demon beasts, and it's not like you can beat them if you fight them, Subaru! So let's run!"

"Er, well, that's all totally true, but I can't run from this. I can't run… Not yet."

Even though he was happy seeing Petra try to stop him, Subaru

gently took her fingers off him one by one. As he did so, the sadness in her big eyes spread even further.

In an effort to chide Petra, Otto, standing right beside her, tossed his voice her way.

"Petra. Mr. Natsuki still has something he needs to do. Until he accomplishes it, Mr. Natsuki will not falter. You understand this well, yes?"

"But…Subaru's weak!! It's dangerous! You should stay with him, Mr. Otto!"

"The way you said that doesn't make it sound as if you have much faith in my strength, though!"

Otto's voice made Petra shake her head. There were tears welling in her eyes as she looked up at Subaru. Subaru got onto his knees so he was on her eye level and then gently stroked her head.

"Sorry, Petra. I'm getting you, Rem, and Frederica out of this mansion safe and sound. But it's not just you three. There's one more person I have to bring out of here."

"Y-you mean Lady Beatrice…?"

"…Even though she hates trouble and acts all lonely, she's a total busybody, always trying to do everything by herself, suffering 'cause of the dumb answers she comes up with and cowering 'cause she won't settle things herself."

When Subaru described the girl, the loneliness of her existence made Petra widen her eyes.

"I mean, Beatrice is pretty much the same age you are, Petra. Your heights might be a little different… Come to think of it, Petra, you might be a lot like her first friend."

"First…friend…?"

Beatrice's first and foremost friend had been Ryuzu Meyer. There had to have been a tangible friendship between her and Beatrice. If Beatrice carried the scars that remained all that time, then maybe…

"After I come back with Beatrice, you'll probably become friends with her. I'm sure you'll like her, Petra. She's awesomely fun to tease."

"M-more than Mr. Otto?"

"Yeah. Fun enough that you won't have use for Otto anymore."

Judging from Otto's expression, he wanted to say something, but Subaru deliberately ignored him.

Then Subaru stopped stroking Petra's head and rose to his feet.

“I’ll go look for Beatrice. I plan to try hard enough that I don’t burn to death, but if I do, carve on my tombstone that I died because of the fire from Otto’s oil, okay?”

“Inscribing tombstones being too much trouble, I will give you a smacking if you do not return safe and sound. Truly, I will.”

Otto seemed to wince as he made his declaration. Then he tilted his back, turning Rem’s sleeping face Subaru’s way. The princess, still asleep as always, couldn’t even bear witness to Subaru’s resolve as he prepared to depart.

That was fine. It wasn’t Rem’s place to see Subaru off. It was Subaru’s job to go to her.

“—Subaru! Be careful, okay?!”

Petra offered up her very own repel crystal. Accepting this, Subaru set off.

He did not reply to Petra’s voice as she called out behind him. Petra didn’t need him to do so, either.

Bit by bit, the flames were covering the mansion, and the place he had spent many days in was quickly turning to ash.

—Would the fire reach even the archive of forbidden books?

As he looked for the door to reach her, Subaru could not help but wonder.

CHAPTER 4

NEXT TIME, I'M SURE WE'LL HAVE TEA

1

Sensing that the Trial had begun, Emilia's mind instantly awakened.

This Trial felt closest to the first one. She was aware of her own existence and firmly conscious that she was undertaking a challenge. It wasn't like the second Trial, when her own existence was far more indistinct.

However, there was clearly one point that differed from before—here, Emilia had no body.

Her five senses had vanished, and her body had been lost. What was present was her consciousness alone—it felt like her consciousness was floating in the sky.

Perhaps this was what it felt like to have one's fickle soul cast into the water by its lonesome? In spite of this mysterious circumstance, Emilia felt no sense of danger as she strove to slowly grasp the situation.

Her nonexistent brain seemed to understand this place posed no danger and that her mind here was able to have such realizations.

Her surroundings were dark. A space of nothing save darkness spread forth, within which Emilia's body did not exist.

That she did not lose herself even so was due to the multiple lights that were floating in the darkness.

These faint lights of various colors were hovering around Emilia.

The glow they emitted resembled that of lesser spirits, but Emilia felt no life force coming from these lights. They were inorganic; perhaps they were closer to magical crystals that gave off light? Either way, she and the lights were the only things in that

world.

“

line as it gently fell.

The drop coursed down her cheek, and just before it fell from her chin onto the blood-marred ground, the world burst apart and vanished.

“—!”

Her consciousness, lacking a body, could not draw in its breath. All she could do was endure the desperate urge to do so with all her might.

As Emilia returned to the darkness once more, she found herself in a world with nothing but her consciousness and the lights floating around her.

What was that blood-ridden Emilia in the scene she saw beyond the light just then?

Thus far, she had seen her own appearance only twice, but she had definitely seen herself in that moment. The problem was that she had no recollection of anything like that ever happening. Or perhaps that was some kind of future that would never exist?

—*No*, Emilia instinctively thought.

Calming her chaotic consciousness, Emilia searched within her memories, turning back toward the very beginning.

The Trials had always indicated at the start what the challenger was to accomplish.

In the first, it was, *First, face your past.*

In the second, it was, *Behold the unknowable present.*

And this third time—it was, *Face the calamity that shall come.*

The calamity that shall come— Did that mean it was the future?

The Trials first showed a past linked to one’s greatest regret; then they showed a present that did not and could not exist; last, the challenger was shown a future she would inevitably have to confront head-on. These were the entirety of the Trials the tomb had prepared for her.

Would that future, of a place enveloped with some kind of twilight, a future where she would tearfully hate someone, actually come to pass one day…?

“

still plenty to go. This was the moment she suddenly grasped the meaning behind the phenomenon.

The lights. Each and every one of the lights hovering in the darkness was a future that awaited Emilia.

This Trial probably would not come to an end until she had witnessed them all.

—Were the futures she would bear witness to all different from one another? Or would they be continuations of the one she just visited?

The answer would come once she touched another light and saw its future.

When she moved to the next light over from the blank space, it became a clear blue passage, like an azure sky—

"It's just like you said. That kid's our enemy, and our wounds run deep. I can't use healing magic, so even if we back out now, I might not be able to save you."

"Then…"

"But that kid's still a kid—Isn't this enough?"

The scene differed from the one before, with two figures standing atop sheer cliffs with a commanding view.

One of them had his back turned toward the deep forest behind him—she could not see his face. But she remembered his voice.

It was one of the people closest to her. Perhaps not as much as the other person, but she definitely remembered him…

The person atop the opposite cliff was on one knee, and as he knelt in this position, he was looking down at the other. Though she could not see his expression, Emilia could tell both of them were making terribly melancholic faces.

"You're…you're a hero. You can't be…anything but a hero…!!"

"I…"

"Thank you…for saving me, damn it!!"

When the other figure reached out with his hand, the figure with his back turned lobbed words of gratitude his way.

—It was a parting of nigh-unbearable sadness. It was a moment of parting marred by indelible despair.

"

darkness.

She had…pathos and melancholy both. But more than that, she held a question toward this Trial.

She did not see herself anywhere within the world she had just visited.

Neither of the people in that place was Emilia. She could guess who they were, but why had she witnessed a scene, a future without her?

Was she being shown a “future” that was the result of her own choices?

Then how was she supposed to face the calamity that would inevitably come?

“

so, I'll keep you to myself—for all eternity. I'm sorry I'm so weak…"

"What, you feel like this is fulfilling your promise? If so…then you should have left me to die wrapped in a mat in that cave! If… If you were going to show me a dawn like this, it should all have ended there! Damn it! Damn it all!"

"I absolutely will not allow you to die for some nonsensical reason like a curse!"

There were wails. There were angry shouts. In different forms, they indicated endings, renewals, meetings, and partings.

"Oh look, I won again."

"To think someone I want to kill this much turned out to be such a gentle person…what a nightmare."

"You have bent your knees before irresistible despair, and you have lost even your sword… Just what is it you still cling to?"

She asked herself whether the things awaiting her, the futures at which she would arrive, were not some kind of mistake.

"Am I really that greedy? Do I really ask so much? I just don't want to be alone. I don't want to become alone… Is that so hard to understand?"

"I'll kill you, just as I promised!! Got that, Subaru Natsukiiiiii?!!"

Was there really nothing but despair in these futures? Was there anything beyond the sadness, beyond the suffering?

"I merely realized something… The days I've spent until now were by no means days I walked aloooone."

"In the end, 'twould seem we must atone with every last drop of our blood, does it not?"

What had gone wrong? Did she wish for the wrong things?

"Why…why won't the soul take?!"

"Whether it's with justice or villainy, ya can't solve every problem under the sun. That's what you just stepped in. If you block my…our path, I don't care if you're a Witch or a dragon. I'll crush you."

She was being shown untold tragedies and calamities. Amid that deluge of despair, which was enough to make her want to cry, she came to doubt everything she had done. If all that awaited the end of her journey was tragedy, that was simply—

"—I believe praying for one's desires is arrogance. Prayer is for seeking forgiveness."

In the future of the final light, a girl her waking self should never have set eyes upon spoke those words.

It was not fleeting enough to be hopeful and too bold to be despairing. Her nonexistent pulse quickened.

After all, she'd seen nothing, nothing but sad, agonizing futures in all that time.

—I want to have a proper conversation with you, no matter what the future holds.

She thought if a certain boy was with her, they could speak together and laugh about the futures they hoped for.

Even if all that awaited her were worlds of tragedy, she felt in her heart that if she could at least have that much—

3

—When her vision opened up, Emilia was standing right in the middle of grass rustling in the wind.

She had arrived immediately after the darkness, and the continually switching worlds had stopped. At first, Emilia thought she was being shown yet another future—but she immediately realized this was something else.

"I have actual hands and feet…and my voice is coming out. So this must be…"

Clenching both hands into fists, Emilia confirmed she possessed physical flesh. Then she surveyed her surroundings, realizing this grassland was unfamiliar and the presence of a little hill right behind her. Atop the hill, a large parasol was spread; naturally, this drew her to go closer.

Climbing up the hill, she found a white table and chairs under

the parasol, and the faint whiff of warm tea wafted in the air. Naturally, she surmised Echidna might be here, so Emilia was on guard, but—

"No one's here?"

There were six chairs arranged by the round table. Set atop the table were confections and cups, equal in number to the chairs, leaving the distinct sense that she had shown up right before some kind of tea party. Yet, it seemed as if everything had been abandoned midway without even cleaning up, leaving nothing of the participants but empty seats.

"

“I am, well, you know—A Witch so terrifying, she makes every hair on your body stand on end.”

Witch—that single word entwined tightly around Emilia’s heart, making it even harder to breathe.

Emilia, often slandered as a Witch because of her appearance, had complex feelings where the term was concerned. However, even so, the being she was standing in front of seemed completely beyond all her preconceptions.

Were all the beings worthy of being called true Witches shrouded in such immense miasma?

“…Hmph, I guess that’s that, then. It really is the boy with the foul look in his eyes who’s the strange one.”

“Foul…look? Are you…talking about Subaru?”

“Heh…”

Letting out a snort, the Witch admired Emilia’s ability to wring out her voice.

“The instant you hear that boy’s name, you perk up? That’s marvelous, but you don’t really have a good grasp of the situation, do you? And…and what do you think of that boy anyway?”

“Subaru told me he loves me… He’s a very precious boy to me, but…”

“O-oh…? Heh, hmm, so that’s it. Well, really it’s all the same to me!”

To Emilia, it was not at all clear why she would dismiss with ragged breath the question she herself had just posed.

However, at the same time, she felt her fear toward the Witch at her back faintly diminish.

She did not know the reason. Perhaps she could simply tell the being was not impervious to dialogue.

Relying upon that sense, Emilia swallowed once; then, hardening her will, she began to speak.

“You’re a Witch, aren’t you…? Does that mean you’re one of the friends Echidna spoke of?”

“Hmph. It’s not like that girl ever called us frie… Wait, I bet she did! And with a smug face, too, I’m sure!”

“I don’t know about a smug look…but if you’re here, where’s Echidna?”

In the first place, Echidna had been in a foul mood every time she’d come into contact with Emilia. Therefore, she felt when Echidna had let slip about her “friends,” it hadn’t been with pride

or with a boastful face at all.

Hearing Emilia's reply, the Witch went, "Now hold on," the tone of her voice lowering just a bit. "She said she doesn't want to meet you. It looked like she had a pretty rough time in the Trials."

"…It seems that way. Echidna seemed *really* hurt the last time I met her."

Emilia couldn't forget the hatred that filled Echidna's voice and expression at the end of the second Trial.

If that was truly the last time she would speak with Echidna, Emilia would be left with terrible regret.

Even so, the relationship between Emilia and Echidna had been one of accepting the results head-on without anyone else's intervention. Even if Emilia ended up being hated, she wanted to take responsibility for her choices.

"It's not that she doesn't care. It's that she's accepted the results… You're quite admirable, you know. Even though that rascal said nothing but mean things to you…"

"That's because Echidna spoke with me. I find it much harder to deal with the people who won't talk to me. If I could, I'd love to face you and talk with you, too, but…"

"—You absolutely cannot do that. If you do that, my fists, which have let so many people die, will cry out."

She spoke in a hard voice, but it was one that betrayed no hint of fabrication. Goose bumps broke out over Emilia once more.

The Witch's words truly did carry the weight of having let a great many people die. That weight remained as the Witch led off by saying, "One really should fulfill her duty, though. Echidna tossed the duty of administrator away, so I am taking it up in her place—What did you see in the third Trial?"

"I saw…many sad worlds. The voice said this was the calamity that would inevitably come. Are these…? Will everything I've seen really happen? Are they really the future?"

"In Echidna's view, it is possible they might happen."

The Witch made a heavy sigh as she replied to the question Emilia harbored. It was close to confirmation, yet vague enough that one could not say for sure. If they had been mere fabrications, it would have been easier on her heart, but…

"The futures you saw could all come true one day. Or you might not see a single one happen ever. However, they are not fabrications. That girl is very fair about these kinds of things. Well,

the fact that she showed you only futures that'd leave a bad taste in your mouth is definitely because she has a bone to pick with you."

"Fair, but… Echidna is a *really* naughty girl, isn't she?"

"Does *naughty* even cover it…?"

The Witch offered a wry comment in response to Emilia's assessment of Echidna but said no more of the matter.

Also, from Emilia's perspective, the current Witch's explanation was good news.

"Why do you seem so relieved?"

"Eh?"

"I'm asking, how can you act relieved after what you just heard? That's strange, isn't it? I mean, you've been shown nothing but terrible futures, yet, in spite of that…"

"But they're not certain, right?"

Emilia had seen nothing but tragedies. It had been an unrelenting series of lamentations and tears of blood.

It had been enough to make her question whether she was making the right choices.

But—

"The futures I saw were a result of choices I've made. But there are also futures that won't turn out that way. Now that I know that, I'll be okay. I can clench my fists and fight."

"

in the future. And she had a large group of dependable people around her.

That wasn't to say it was good to blindly depend on them.

But if they relied on her, and she on them, they would be together always.

Even as she depended on others, Emilia would develop her own self-reliance.

It was a choice she could never have made before, what with her lacking confidence and fear of the future.

"…You're strong. That part of you isn't like your mother at all."

"—! You know my mother?"

The unexpected connection surprised Emilia, leaving her voice slightly hoarse. Her reaction made the Witch hesitate for a time, after which she let out her breath.

"Yes, I know her well. But I will say nothing of her—I've promised not to."

"

"…Could it be that you're…crying?"

"…! I'm not…crying! I don't cry. I don't have the right to cry… not anymore."

"No one needs a right to…"

Cry, Emilia was about to say as she turned, wanting to wipe away the Witch's tears.

She no longer felt the grand, overwhelming presence that had dominated her first meeting with the Witch. She wanted to stand with her on equal footing.

But when Emilia tried to turn to face her, the Witch—

"—Mnfff!"

As Emilia turned, an arm wrapped around her head, holding her face close against something soft. She immediately realized she had been pulled into a hug.

Her face was pinned against the Witch's chest, completely preventing her from moving.

"I told you…not turning was the right choice. What a badly behaved girl you are."

"…You hate the idea of me seeing you cry that much?"

"I don't want you to see me at all! I can't face anyone with… Ahhh, good grief! If only Echidna had taken care of things properly! And Sekhmet, and Daphne, and Typhon, and Carmilla, too!"

The Witch's yelling made her ears tremble. It sounded like angry shouting, but it wasn't. Emilia felt undiluted love for each of the unfamiliar names spoken by her.

"Are you…done crying?"

"I'm angry; my tears dried up. But now I just feel indignant. I'm so furious, every hair on my head is shaking."

"That's *really* scary."

"I'm serious. We're done here."

Her voice was gentle. Emilia could feel no anger from it. But something happened that proved her words were no lie.

As the Witch hugged Emilia against her chest, Emilia realized a change had arisen in the place right behind her—where a tea party should have been set up—as a powerful wind blew through the space.

"That is the way out of Echidna's castle. Turn and walk forward, and you will be able to go back."

"

you? You…you still have things you need to do. Why not try taking the first step?"

She felt the Witch's voice right above her head fade. There was warmth within the arms hugging her and a faintly audible heartbeat coming from the chest her head rested against—which was strange, given that the Witch was dead.

"…Hey, are you listening to me?"

“Eh, ah, I’m sorry. I felt oddly calm just now…”

“That part of you is so…”

“—?”

I made her angry, thought Emilia, but the Witch’s words softened. They felt nostalgic for some reason.

Before she could press the point, the Witch declared, “Okay, time to go!”

“Wah!”

“Walk straight forward. With this, the Trials have ended… The barrier will open.”

Something grasped Emilia’s head and turned it right around with such swiftness and precision that she never got a look at the Witch’s face—Instead, what she saw before her was a single door.

Standing right there atop the hill between her and the tea-party preparations was a door all by its lonesome.

“If I…leave through there…”

The Trials would end, and the barrier would be lifted. These were the results that Emilia had sought.

Then, whether they liked it or not, a choice would be forced upon the residents of the Sanctuary. She did not know how many of the people gathered in the clearing would leave in the very end. Nor did she know if doing so would bring uncertainty to their lives or if all this was truly in their best interests.

But just as Subaru had told Garfiel, Emilia had something to tell them, too.

Time was ever in motion. And amid that passage of time, everyone needed to come to terms with themselves.

And if no solution presented itself, Emilia wanted to join with them and search for one together.

If pulling people by the hand or pushing them forward was too difficult, she could still walk with them side by side.

—Even though she was unreliable, gutless, and had only barely begun to demonstrate she was suited for the throne.

“It’s fine.”

“

After smoothing out her silver hair, Emilia stepped forward. That she did not turn around, never seeing the Witch's face to the very end, was her way of respecting the Witch's will.

She no longer felt any of the fear that came unbidden when first encountering the Witch. She simply puffed out her chest and walked with pride.

Then, when she moved her hand toward the door leading outside, she said the thought that suddenly came to mind.

"Hey, Miss Witch. If you run into Echidna, can you tell her something for me?"

"What is it?"

"If we meet again, next time, let's have tea together. Even if she haunts my dreams, I'm sure I'll welcome her—If possible, I'd like to have it with you and the other Witches, too."

"—!"

For a moment, Emilia's request made the Witch hesitate. And then—

"Yes, I'll tell her exactly that. And if she doesn't like it, I'll grab her by the scruff of her neck and drag her along anyway!"

The Witch confidently spoke those words with conviction. The tone of her voice made plain that she was being quite serious.

Emilia smiled pleasantly as she received the reply. She pushed the door open, stepping into the unfolding darkness beyond.

She did not hesitate. Emilia understood precisely where it led.

—Having overcome her past and selected the present, this was the door that continued into the future.

4

When she awoke from the Trials, it felt different than coming out of sleep.

Her body had not been sleeping; rather, her soul had been separated from her body. With the soul split from the body, and the consciousness remaining awake, one might say it was natural that it would feel different.

If she was sleeping normally, Emilia, never a morning person, would have been in peril of losing precious time. In the past, she had Puck, but she would have to deal with such things herself thereafter.

"…Ah, oh no. It feels like I'm about to cry."

Clenching her teeth, Emilia shook her head, as if to ward off the sense of loss she had yet to recover from. From there, she rose to her feet, stroked the writing on the wall with her palm—and then turned her gaze toward the back of the stone room.

The stone room in which the Trial was conducted, one she had already passed through several times over, had another door at the back leading farther in. It had been firmly closed and seemed completely impassable. Yet, now—

"…It's open. Is this saying, *Come on in*?"

The Witch atop the hill had said going through the door would lift the barrier. But though the tomb had changed, Emilia did not see any sign that the barrier had been lifted.

Yet, at the same time, she felt something else: In a true sense, what awaited deeper within was the key to lifting that barrier.

"I mustn't get all worried. Anyway, I'll go, see, and do. Okay, let's go."

Pushing back against the faint unease in her chest, Emilia spurred herself on and passed through the door.

Inside was a path that was more cramped than the one that led from the entrance to the stone room, which Emilia could pass through because of her relatively low stature. It was not long until she arrived at a new stone room.

This was a little chamber substantially smaller than the one in which the Trials had been conducted. The other stone room had by no means been large, but a scant two of the large beds from Roswaal Manor would have left no legroom whatsoever.

But such stray thoughts vanished as soon as she saw what was placed in the center of the room.

To Emilia's eyes, it looked like a coffin.

The coffin was transparent, probably made from magic crystals of some sort. The purity was so high, it made her shudder from a single glance, rivaling—or even exceeding—that of the stone Puck had used as his icon.

Within the coffin constructed from magic crystals of such abnormal composition rested a single woman—naturally, she was not breathing. Her pallid face bore no signs of vitality; this was an empty shell devoid of life.

She had long, glossy hair as pure as any snow. Her skin was reminiscent of porcelain, and her face was so lovely that just seeing

it was enchanting. Her torso and limbs were covered in a dress that seemed pitch-black, making her a woman of black and white, the extremes of the world, with her ethereal beauty unmarred by anything extraneous.

Without thinking, Emilia let a sigh of admiration trickle from her lips.

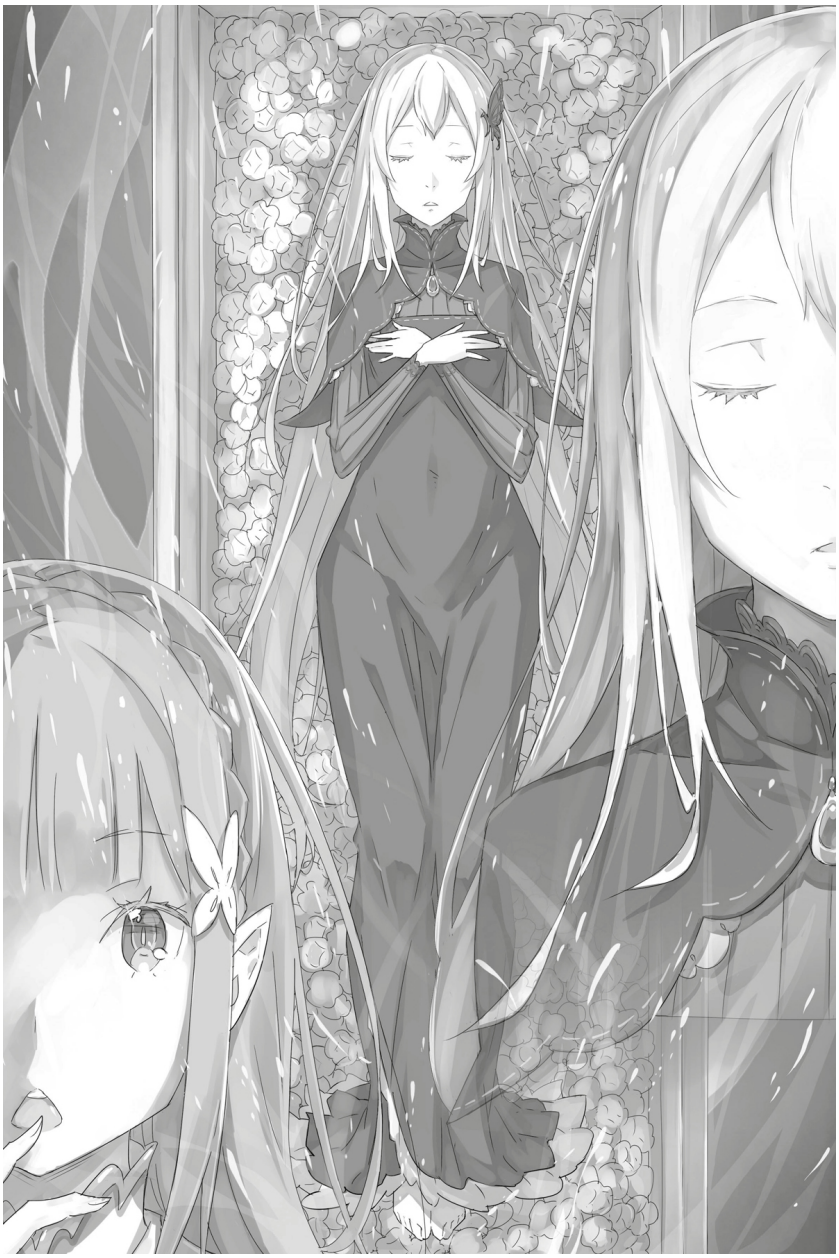
If she looked in a mirror, she would be greeted by one of the beauties of the age, but Emilia had little appreciation for her own face. However, her heart was now trembling from the immaculate beauty of the woman before her.

It was a face she had met many times over in the Trials, that of the Witch of Greed—

"—She looks like Echidna, but who is this?"

—Though reminiscent of the Witch, Emilia had never seen this woman before.

"



“And yet, this isn’t Echidna…but she does resemble her. An older sister, maybe?”

Her memories of the Witch’s appearance were still fresh; there were many commonalities between her and this woman. With her eyelids closed, her face, from her eyes to the bridge of her nose down to her lips, seemed constructed in a similar fashion. But in contrast to Echidna, who looked to be in the latter half of her teens, this woman was old enough to be in her midtwenties—though there seemed no doubt they were connected by blood.

“It’s *really* weird for an older sister to be resting here even though it’s Echidna’s tomb, but…”

With no other conclusions coming to mind, Emilia tilted her head at the mysteriousness of it.

Then she tilted her head further as she noticed the ritual that spread throughout the entirety of the tomb, with this coffin as its center.

“Ah…,” she went, her voice slipping out unconsciously. Both the scale of the ritual and the level of its complexity were impressive. Accordingly, Emilia was certain this was the key to the barrier constructed in the Sanctuary.

“Incredible… It’s amazing; I don’t have any idea what to do…”

Though she was a spirit mage, Emilia strove to have a decent understanding of magic beyond her specialty. However, the complexity of the ritual before her eyes was far beyond anything like the fundamentals that Emilia was familiar with.

If it was stopped once, it would never activate again—of course, there was no need to do so regardless…

“This. If I stop the flow here, that should break it…”

Touching a hand against the coffin, Emilia found the core of the precisely crafted ritual. It matched up with where the woman sleeping in the coffin folded her hands over her chest—that was the nucleus.

For one brief moment, she hesitated. If she broke the ritual, the barrier would be lifted, and the tomb, bereft of its duty, would become dormant. If that happened, she would lose her only means of going to the tea party as well as all leads about the Witch who knew her mother—

“…That has nothing to do with any of this!”

Emilia slammed a fist against the coffin, seemingly to drive her hesitance away.

That instant, the core of the ritual shattered, and cracks spread across the crystalline lid of the coffin like a spider's web.

The shattering of the core made the flow of mana go completely out of control, sending a torrent of dazzling light surging within the room. This light disturbed the serene atmosphere, making Emilia's silver hair glimmer, before finally, it suddenly vanished.

The tomb's functions had come to a halt—that was what Emilia read from the shift in the air.

"This time, it's over… Mm, it has to be."

There was no change visible to the eye. Yet, something was unmistakably different. Clenching her teeth, Emilia was certain that the room had become a simple resting place for a coffin—that the tomb itself had become a mere structure.

With this, the barrier imprisoning the residents of the Sanctuary was gone. The choice whether to accept that result and live outside the Sanctuary was now theirs.

Of course, with Roswaal's support at her back, Emilia intended to respect the decision the people made, no matter who they might be—

"Come to think of it, Roswaal mentioned a teacher… Is this person his teacher?"

Roswaal had spoken the word when he'd directed biting sarcasm and ferocious insults at Emilia just prior to her challenging the tomb. He'd said, in the beginning, it was just him and his teacher. She didn't know any details about what it was the two of them had started.

But if he meant the Sanctuary itself, the ties between this woman and Roswaal ran deep.

"On that note, I need to speak to everyone…to Ram and Roswaal especially."

The woman in the coffin was secondary. Her top priority was to tell everyone the fact that the barrier had been lifted and to get the people remaining in the Sanctuary out—Subaru hadn't explained the fine details, but he had said this was necessary.

And that probably had something to do with Roswaal's odd behavior. She needed to hurry.

Turning, Emilia slipped through the passage with urgent steps, heading through the stone room on her way outside. The people of

the Sanctuary and Earlham Village should have still been in the clearing, with Ryuzu and Milde representing them.

Then, as Emilia raced out of the tomb—

"—Eh?"

—the skin-stabbing cold and the ferociously blowing snow covering the Sanctuary made Emilia let out a white breath.

CHAPTER 5

I LOVE YOU DOWN TO YOUR BLOOD AND GUTS

The scent of smoke and fire filling his nostrils stole Garfiel's attention for only an instant.

He had a vague awareness of scorching heat in the distance. Slowly but surely, the burning was spreading, which meant the fire was gradually consuming the mansion. Just who had unleashed it?

"Getting distracted again?"

Not letting a single moment of stagnancy slip by, Elsa closed in and swung, pursuing Garfiel with her blade.

Seeking to take his life as the price of looking away was a rather greedy thing, even more so where Garfiel, onetime apostle of the Witch of Greed, was concerned.

But having severed all ties with the Witch of Greed, he was unmoved by such avarice.

"As if!!"

"That's too bad."

Once more, Garfiel caught a slashing knife by his fangs before biting down and shattering it.

Having lost her weapon to the power of his jaws, Elsa instantly let go of the handle and leaped backward. Garfiel remained planted at a medium distance as she put a fresh kukri into her hand, tilting her head.

"You pretended to be distracted. Quite an actor you are. Or perhaps that was an invitation?"

"You don't need to make every single thing ya say suggestive… Would ya stop playin' dumb already?"

"—? Hmm? About what…?"

The smile on Elsa's glossy lips only deepened Garfiel's suspicions. From her reaction, he concluded there was no

connection between Elsa and the fire. The time they'd spent together in mortal combat had established she wasn't one to rely on trickery or seduction.

In that case, the chance that someone on his side was responsible for the fire—probably spawning from one of Subaru's plans—was high.

"That's pretty extreme…but it sure as hell is effective. Way to go, General!"

"I am a little unsure what this is about, but don't you put a little too much stock in him?"

"Ha, save the sour grapes. I told ya, those demon beasts standin' in the way ain't no match for the general! Piece of cake!"

If Subaru was the mastermind behind the fire, the objective was probably to drive off the demon beasts. Whether the proposal came from Subaru or Otto, it was exactly the kind of thing they would resort to.

Demon beasts feared fire, too. They'd probably succeeded in securing the escape route. Which meant—

"If I smash ya flat, that'll complete our victory!"

"You certainly talk a good game—isn't that easier said than done, though?"

As Garfiel psyched himself up, a bloody smile hovered in his field of vision as Elsa's form grew indistinct.

As she entered the realm of pure speed in a single step, Garfiel opted to lower his stance and charge as well. With the space between them gone in a single instant, the two collided in the middle of the corridor—

"—!!"

—or rather, just before they were to do so, one kicked off the ceiling and the other from the floor as both respectively bounded away from that place.

The next moment, the wall facing the courtyard was destroyed by an impact that seemed to make the entire building shudder. The impact had struck the first-floor-turned-battlefield, but clearly the floor above was not spared as it began to cave in.

All this was due to the enormous, boulder-like demon beast that had so grandly crashed into the building.

Naturally, the appearance of a beast so huge that it shocked the imagination was an unexpected development even to Garfiel. This was followed by something more unexpected still—a cutesy voice

levying objections from atop the mass of boulders.

"Awww, I can't believe you're doing this! Stand up, Rock Piggie! Quick!!"

"Ahhh? Some runt's ridin' that thing?"

The rambunctious voice he heard coming from atop the beast left Garfiel with a grimace. When he looked closer, there was a girl with blue hair in a braid straddling the back of the mass of boulders —so this was the Beast Master in the flesh?

And the reason this Beast Master was intruding here was—

"Garf! So this is where you were!"

"Sis?!"

With a flourish, a blond maid—Frederica—slipped through the shattered wall and landed in the half-destroyed corridor. The reunion with Frederica, who was supposedly fleeing, made Garfiel rush over, eyes bulging.

"What the hell are ya still doin' here?! What happened to Ram's sis, the general, and the rest?!"

"I fulfilled the duty entrusted to me. You understand the reason I remained behind, don't you?"

Seeing Frederica close one eye as she spoke these words shut Garfiel right up.

He could see a number of wounds Frederica had sustained. Of course he could. In keeping the Beast Master at bay, she must have taken on countless demon beasts in the process.

Unlike Garfiel, who'd trained and trained as he kept struggling to become stronger, his elder sister had no doubt spent many days that had nothing to do with fighting. Just how deeply had this battle cut into his sister's flesh and bones?

"…Don't make such a pathetic face."

Noticing Garfiel's gloomy expression, Frederica landed an open-palm chop right on his wide-open forehead. Though it didn't hurt, Garfiel let out a reflexive "ow," glaring at his older sister.

"Garf, I understand you are being considerate, but I, too, am a servant of the Mathers family… For better or worse, I have had the fundamentals of self-defense drilled into me."

"Ya say that but… Ah, then again, Ram's damn strong. Aight, you've convinced me."

"The fact that you chose her as the most relevant point of comparison puts me in a slightly awkward position…"

Frederica put a hand to her forehead as she clacked her fangs,

seeming a little troubled. Perhaps it could be chalked up to them being siblings, but Garfiel and Frederica were exactly alike in certain habits.

And apparently, Garfiel and Frederica weren't the only ones around with this kind of relationship.

"Meili, are you all right? I hope you're safe, but I do wish you didn't interfere."

"Sheesh, Elsa, you're so self-centered! The main reason I have to work this hard is because you ran off ahead! You'd better reflect on that!"

"Once we're done here, I'll make it up to you—now, do your job."

Elsa's reply made Meili pout as she obediently got to work. The moment the young girl clapped her hands, the boulder-like creature instantly swung its body around and then slowly turned its head toward Garfiel and Frederica.

Garfiel sensed other demon beasts drawing near from both inside and outside the mansion. She truly was a Beast Master.

However, Elsa quizzically cocked her head to the side with a questioning look.

"The number of demon beasts seems rather low…"

"The big maid nailed a bunch of them before we got here! Besides, the mansion's been set on fire. On top of that, it seems like the shadow lion died."

Meili, answering Elsa's question with a sour look on her face, continued:

"It was a rare one that obeyed me despite still having its horn, but its short temper was the flaw in that jewel. And it failed me right when I needed it most…!"

"I have trouble understanding why you brought such a difficult demon beast along to begin with."

"Because no one else could keep the others in line! …Anyway, Elsa, what about your opponent?"

Looking down at the corridor from atop the demon beast, Meili caught sight of Garfiel. "Hmm," she went, letting out a breath of deep interest with a passionate smile that was extremely strange for a girl of her age on numerous levels.

"Elsa has her eyes on you, Mr. Scary Face. You poor, poor thing."

"If it's a nasty face you want, there's no topping the general. So

what, you sisters gonna come at me together?"

Garfiel's reply earned him a look of surprise not only on Meili's face but Elsa's as well.

They weren't shocked at being called *sisters*. Certainly, the two didn't seem connected by blood. The pair might have been similar in appearance, but it was far more difficult to claim a family resemblance.

But they were most definitely sisters—that was what Garfiel's intuition told him.

"Sisters? Yes, I suppose you're right… So now that we have sisters gathered on one side and siblings on the other, I think it's time we got back to business. Don't you?"

Standing beside the demon beast, Elsa posed the question as she pointed the tip of her kukri toward him.

With a quick glance, Garfiel checked on Frederica's state as she stood beside him. Her breathing was ragged, her face was pale from blood loss, and her visible wounds were, on average, ones that could not simply be shrugged off.

"Garf."

Noticing his gaze, Frederica called out to him. Garfiel could not help but force out a smile at the emotions infused within her simple mention of his name—*Don't be disappointed in me*, Frederica's gaze begged.

Quietly, Garfiel stepped forward—this was where everything would be settled.

"The mansion's on fire, we got a horde o' demon beasts outside, and my older sister behind me is tryin' to put up a strong front, as battered as she is."

"—?"

"Got a bunch of people I gotta save and some powerful enemies whose teeth I gotta kick in. The general said he's counting on me. And the girl I love chewed me out real good, too."

"What in the world is Mr. Scary Face getting at…?"

"Ain't it obvious?!"

Strangely, Elsa and Meili both had their heads tilted at the exact same angle. In contrast to their questioning looks, Garfiel clacked his fangs with a radiant look on his face.

"With a situation like this, what man in the world wouldn't be burnin' up?! It's time to do this! This is basically *before the Dragon, Sword Saint Reid drew his sword and laughed*!"

“That’s an idiom for someone who’s seriously messed up in the head, you know?”

“Yeah, and? I’m about to take on the both of ya, so how’s that the wrong thing to say?”

Garfiel bluntly acknowledged the level of his own recklessness.

Elsa blinked hard, temporarily at a loss. However, this lasted for only a few moments.

Elsa broke into a smile as the light of madness flared in her eyes. She licked her lips in anticipation.

“Yes. You’re absolutely right.”

Garfiel slammed his shields together as he prepared to face his eager opponent.

“Wait a second, Elsa—have you already forgotten what we came here to do? Mama’s gonna scold us.”

“I suppose so. You deal with the other one, then. I want to focus on this child.”

“Boo. You always do this, asking me to do stuff at the drop of a hat. I mean, really—”

Meili complained about how Elsa was abandoning the job, but before she could finish her thought, Garfiel drove home why it was important to not get distracted.

“—Oooaaah!”

Suddenly raising a battle cry, Garfiel poured his strength into the sole of his foot. Instantly, it punched through the half-destroyed mansion and straight into the ground, kicking up a square of soil. Thus, he launched it forward with a tremendous kick.

“—?!”

Elsa dropped into a low stance that verged on crawling on all fours as she evaded the hurtling missile of packed earth. But the boulder-like demon beast behind her, unable to dodge as quickly with its enormous frame, sustained a direct hit. The impact bowled it over, sending it spinning and crashing into the wall.

“Ahhhhh!”

Meili, who had been riding said demon beast, was thrown off it by the sheer force. Elsa slid in to catch her just before she would have hit the ground headfirst.

“G-Garf, what in the world did you do just now?”

“That’s the power of my blessing, As long as my feet are planted on the ground, I can hit whatever I can see. I’ll say this only once: I won’t let ya interfere with this fight. Not you, and not the little

sister over there, either."

Garfiel bared his fangs as he made his declaration. But the blessing of the earth spirit wasn't nearly as potent as he claimed.

Beyond heightening his healing abilities, his power was fully capable of churning up the ground or causing it to cave in. However, the range of this was limited to where his limbs could reach.

In other words, he was bluffing. But precisely because it was a bluff, Garfiel smugly smiled. He had learned from Subaru and Otto these were the times where a smile was absolutely necessary.

"—Meili. Leave the bare minimum outside to maintain the perimeter. Call the others and rouse that demon beast over there."

"…You're gonna make Mama angry."

Freed from Elsa's arms, Meili murmured in a low voice. However, she had already grasped that the situation didn't leave them with many options. Sighing, Meili blew a finger whistle.

She quietly waited as the shrill, high-pitched sound echoed throughout the manor grounds. The demon beasts would be coming. A large force was on its way, gathering to crush Garfiel and Frederica.

His lust for battle flared even brighter. His soul howled he could not lose here.

"I will pluck your limbs off to lighten you and take you home with me. I will love you longer than your cherished person."

"Ain't there even one option to make ya give up on the whole bowel thing?"

Speaking in exasperation as he cracked his neck, Garfiel adopted a forward-leaning stance as he prepared to intercept his foe.

Her upper body swaying, Elsa lowered both hands and let her kukri knives fall to the floor. In their place, she held a pair of vile, malevolent blades—one white, one black, both gleaming in the moonlight.

"Sis, just focus on protectin' yourself."

"Meili, you mustn't move a single step forward."

Without any signal, they clashed head-on, leaving their respective sisters behind.

The battle between the Bowel Hunter and the Sanctuary's Shield entered its final scene.

Then the corridor of the mansion exploded into a confused, chaotic battle, a banquet of blood, flesh, and bloodlust.

“—!!”

When a green tail passed before his eyes, Garfiel opened his fangs and bit down without a second thought.

Purple fluid sprayed, and the noxious liquid burned as it spattered across his flesh. But he cared not. With a mighty swipe of his arm, he smashed both of the two-headed snake’s skulls.

An instant later, malevolent death in the form of a curved blade grazed just past the tip of his chin.

Following in the wake of that slash, a gust blew the remains of the ruined demon beast away. After his momentary brush with death, Garfiel advanced instead of giving ground, smacking the face of impending doom away.

Both his arms were spread out wide, catching his opponent by the torso and flank. Her bones and viscera squelched as powerful hands twisted wherever they found purchase.

“

After a moment of indecision, Garfiel decided against turning around as he focused his attention on the woman as she prepared to attack with her right arm—allowing the deadly blade to bury itself into his right shoulder, momentarily locking him in place.

The lethal attack was about to land.

"—?!!"

That was when he kicked up the remains of the two-headed snake between him and the blade aimed at the back of his head.

The corpse kept the keen edge from slicing into him, but the blunt force was still effective.

The blow dazed him and knocked him into a spin, creating a fatal opening—or at least it would have had he not poured all his strength into his feet beforehand. With the blessing of the earth spirit, he propelled himself off the floor in a single leap.

Garfiel's unexpected behavior and counterattack caught the woman by surprise. In the span of a few moments, he swung his left arm in a low arc to grab the woman's face—a left arm growing explosively as it became a monstrous limb.

Using partial transformation, he tore at her face as if to rip it right off.

"Gyahhhhh—!!"

The clawing left intense gouges, stronger and deeper than the one that had once smashed her face. The five finger-blades carved deep inside her skull, making even that woman scream and slowing the movements of her feet.

"Raaaagh!!"

The woman took a direct kick straight to the torso, sending her body flying backward with ease.

With her ribs already broken and her internal organs already crushed, it would not have been strange had she died from the pain from being slashed and pounded like that alone. But even as fresh blood coursed from the prone woman, a broken, laughing voice also escaped her.

—Her life had not been extinguished. Her fighting spirit was undiminished. Her nature was unsalvageable for all eternity.

"Tch! It's just one thing after another!"

Just as Garfiel was preparing to launch a follow-up attack, demon beasts cut across the battlefield to bear down upon him.

Mice with black wings, large ferocious dogs with mottled patterns on their bodies, and a horde of two-headed snakes burning

with rage for their slain kin—plus one back-in-action enormous pile of boulders aptly called a Rock Pig—all came rushing at him.

“Garf! I’ll handle those!”

Right as Garfiel braced himself against the demon beasts aiming to land a surprise attack, the monsters were ripped asunder somewhere behind him. There was no time to turn around, but he could still tell that Frederica’s ferocious attacks were mowing their foes down.

All that remained was for Garfiel to deal with the one charging at him with a frame large enough to rival the whole mansion.

“Get pancaked!!”

Receiving Meili’s command, the Rock Pig bounded forward with its woefully short four legs, leaping toward him. No longer was this simply a charging beast; it had transformed into a projectile with the mass of a falling building.

No single person had the power to withstand such a blow—which was precisely what the monster’s instincts cried out.

Spreading and firmly planting both feet, Garfiel called upon the full force of his blessing of the earth spirit. The blessing of the soil conveyed through the soles of his feet made the tendons and muscles of his entire body swell and throb—the blood lurking within him burst forth as his flesh changed form.

“—Oooooooo!!!”

The booming roar of his soul was not directed outward; it reverberated within his own flesh and blood.

His abominable, difficult-to-accept bloodline had been a constant and not always welcome part of his life. Now, of his own volition, he summoned it forth, seized control of it, and turned it into raw power to carve out his own destiny.

His skeleton creaked and groaned as it transformed. His neck, his torso, and his head were changing into those of a beast. A great golden tiger’s mane sprouted as his clothes burst apart, unable to withstand the pressure. But the shields attached to both his arms remained in place, now looking like bangles on swelling arms that appeared to be violence incarnate, rivaling even the Rock Pig in stature.

“

The rocky demon beast's ramming attack was stopped cold as the ferocious tiger pounded its greatsword-like claws into the pig's face. Some of the claws were ripped off at their base by the thick, formidable hide; though not slain by the force of the charge, the great tiger was nonetheless forced back, reeling as its enormous opponent followed up by stomping down on its chest from straight above, driving the tiger into the floor and drawing sprays of blood.

"Keep it up, Rock Piggie!!"

Even though she heard the sounds of its bones breaking and its flesh being crushed, the demon beast's master did not let her guard down.

Obeying its master's almost-tearful command, the Rock Pig issued a roar as it raised both its front paws upward, coming down for a second stomp that was aimed at the great tiger's skull.

—But before it could, the ferocious tiger used the strength of its abdominal muscles to launch its body upward; the demon beast took the blow straight in its wide-open gut.

The demon beast with boulder-like hide normally never revealed its belly, where its defenses were thin and fragile.

Sharp fangs pierced the tough skin, which the tiger's claws had failed to penetrate, cutting deep into the flesh.

"Grrrraaaaggghhhh—!!"

While keeping its mouth lodged in the Rock Pig's gut, the ferocious great tiger rolled its body sideways. This tore at the prey's flesh, which was still caught on the fangs and was the predatory behavior characteristic of the water dragons.

The great tiger's fangs rent flesh not to consume but to kill without mercy.

There was a vast amount of blood and viscera that poured out, proportional to its prey's enormous frame. The gore flowed out in a veritable wave, flooding the mansion corridor.

"

answer the call. Her advantage had crumbled in mere moments.

"Ughhh! Look what you've done! Elsa! Elsaaa! Do something!"

"…What a slave driver you are."

Tousling her braid, the killer responded to Meili's tearful cry for help. Slowly, Elsa Gramhilde's raven-black hair swayed as she approached, her savage face having already regenerated.

Exuding seductive charm and a murderous beauty, she shot Garfiel a passionate glance.

"You tore into a woman's face without hesitation. You truly are marvelous…"

"*Gargh, raaagh…!!*"

The smiling woman's vile, blood-marred visage made the great tiger growl with a fierce shake of its broken shoulders. The trembling tiger's massive frame grew taut as the enlarged flesh gradually returned to human form. A few seconds later, a half-naked boy reappeared on the field of battle.

"Argh… Crap, looks like I'm back. Head freakin' hurts…"

"I see… So that makes you a half-beast. I thought you were merely a human with a foul look in his eyes."

"Gotta say, if that was the rule, no way our general'd be human."

Shaking his head, Garfiel checked how his body felt upon his returning to human form.

The process of compressing his skeleton back into a smaller body had joined his broken shoulders enough that they could move at least. That said, even slight movements made creaks and white-hot pain shoot through him. It would be a long time before he would move at full strength again.

"You said it didn't bother you…but you must be thinking it is rather absurd by now?"

"

“Me, I ain’t ready to give up. And I ain’t takin’ back what I said.”

Shaking his head, he rejected such timid thoughts. He never needed them to begin with.

“You ain’t immortal. It’s that ya won’t die till someone kills ya, right? Ain’t that right, vampire?”

“…You knew.”

“I had a hunch. Me, I loved readin’ books since waaaay back. I knew there were special sorts like that. Didn’t think I’d meet one right after leavin’ home, though.”

From time to time, books from the outside world found their way into the Sanctuary, though Garfiel had no idea who the sender might’ve been, nor could he tell from the types of books what they hoped he might learn from them.

Garfiel read anything he could, so that he might one day find a way to butcher whatever it was that saddened the woman he’d fallen for.

It was in the course of those studies that he had read somewhere that the beings known as vampires possessed special characteristics.

“Apparently, one of the old Witches was one, too. That Witch is dead. And that means you can die, too.”

Garfiel had already dealt Elsa what were supposed to be fatal wounds four times and counting. Even if she’d inherited that characteristic from an immortal monster of legend, her regenerative power had to have limits.

It’d take probably one or two more times, and that’d settle things. But before it came to that—

“…If your little sister swears to never do evil ever again, I ain’t unwillin’ to let her go.”

“…You truly are an adorable child.”

With a smile, she dashed the final bouquet of compassion he offered her. That was his signal.

With an explosive step, Garfiel leaped straight forward. A wicked blade sliced directly down to intercept him, aiming to cleave his head. The force of the attack tore the mansion corridor apart.

Catching the attack on his shield, the blade cut shallowly into his breast. Heedless of the spatter of blood, he pressed on, continuing to advance—

“Gusteko, where I was born, is a very, very cold land far to the north.”

They continued to exchange blows when suddenly, words woven like a song slipped into his eardrums.

He shouldn’t have heard it. His consciousness was ablaze, intercepting and dealing lethal strikes with every passing moment, leaving no room for such a voice to slip through. That should have been the case, but it sneaked in regardless.

“It is a country with a vast chasm between rich and poor. Children abandoned by the destitute are not a rarity. I was one myself, without parents for as long as I can remember, living off what stagnant water and scraps I could find.”

“—Raaagh!!”

“I stole, and I hurt people. Days spent like that blended together… What was I living for; what was happiness? In those days, I had no time to think about such things.”

Garfiel gave a mighty swing of his arm to blow Elsa’s face away. She sidestepped the attack. A silver arc flashed. He tilted his body to dodge it. Evasion became counterattack, only to be foiled. Distance opened between them.

“That day was a particularly cold day.”

“Shaddap! I ain’t listenin’!!”

“On that day, the wind blowing down from the sacred mountain was cold, and it was freezing inside the city. Amid raging snow so cold it froze even your breath, I was working as a thief when a shop owner caught me.”

Elsa let out a tender sigh, speaking as if she were watching a dream.

The fury of her blade grew wilder, carving into Garfiel as his shoulder injuries dulled his defenses.

“No one would have complained had he killed me then, but I was a woman. Even now, I remember the vulgar smile on that man’s face as he started to tear off my clothes.”

“Gaaagh…!”

“As that cold, freezing wind blew, he stripped off my tunic and even took my underwear… When I thought it was better to freeze to death than to suffer whatever indignities he would subject me to, I picked up a piece of glass that just happened to be close by.”

She raised one of her long legs and kicked at the side of Garfiel’s head, sending him crashing into the wall. The impact

stunned him, rattling his brain, but he'd also shattered the arch of Elsa's foot in the process. Her expression of ecstasy sent a shudder straight through him.

"It was not as if I meant to do it. It just so happened that I thrust the piece of glass into his belly."

"

intend to forgive her. The only thing he could do was end her.

"—I'm gonna kill ya, Elsa Gramhilde."

"—It is because you will kill me that you are my first love, Garfiel Tinzel."

Calling each other by name was the one and only connection they shared. The rest, they entrusted to violence.

The wicked blades became light, raging, carving, slicing the half-destroyed mansion corridor apart. Amid that shower of blades, Garfiel dodged—No, he defended with the minimum amount of movement with his shields, holding his ground.

Blood flowed as a blade nicked his shoulder, his belly, his leg, and his head, but Garfiel was unshaken.

The distance shrank to six paces. Garfiel swung his left arm, sending the shield atop it flying straight forward.

At five paces, the shield struck Elsa's arm, shattering her fingers, causing her to drop the weapon in her left hand.

At four paces, countless slicing attacks came at the now-defenseless left side of his torso, drawing blood. He did not stop.

At three paces, he stomped with the sole of his foot. The ground exploded and rose up. The mansion uttered its death cry and broke apart.

At two paces, the Bowel Hunter struck with a spinning attack at maximum speed, which she aimed at his torso with more force than he'd ever witnessed in his entire life.

At one pace, he covered his chest with his right shield, the arm underneath breaking as he parried the Bowel Hunter's blow.

"—Do you think you blocked it? Don't be careless."

Garfiel heard that laughter-filled voice as she dropped a long leg toward his face. The descending heel and the dully gleaming blade embedded within were aimed right at the center of Garfiel's head—

"—Elsa!"

Suddenly, a shriek-like voice made Elsa leap back.

The east wing of the mansion, after being engulfed in flame and withstanding repeated blows, was finally collapsing. Meili, right under one of the falling fragments, clutched her head and called out to her elder sister.

It was there that Elsa leaped. She slammed her blade in, carving apart the falling rubble overhead. She sliced, gouged, and penetrated the plummeting pieces one after another. And yet, the

cascade of debris never ceased—

Without warning, a gust rushed past her feet. The wind, sporting a beautiful and supple beast with a golden mane, grabbed the girl in danger of being crushed by falling rubble, carrying her to safety.

"Elsaaa!"

Whisked away by the beautiful four-legged beast, Meili desperately called out to Elsa as the creature leaped outside.

Elsa did not turn toward her. Garfiel had already come.

"—!!"

The blade in Elsa's right hand clashed with the bestial claws of Garfiel's left.

With a destructive sound, Garfiel's left arm was ruined, while Elsa's right wrist was left in ugly tatters. Fresh blood scattered all about as Elsa thrust her useless arm forward to shove Garfiel down.

They jostled, practically embracing each other as they bit into each other's necks, then separated as if repelled.

"Urgh, nghhh…"

The left side of her neck was hot. Elsa was unable to even put a hand on the wound, which was bleeding freely, but her cheeks were flushed nonetheless.

Her breath was so hot that it almost seemed like it changed color. Her eyes were filled with unquenchable passion.

—Then she watched as Garfiel hoisted up the Rock Pig's massive body and hurled it.

The boy's eyes blazed with ferocious emotion even as his neck bled from the wound her teeth had left behind. Though she knew where the arc of the hurled mass of rock would end, Elsa continued to gaze at the man she longed for until the very end.

Her labored breaths came unsteadily. As she gazed at the golden-haired boy who aroused such excitement deep in her chest, she said only one thing.

"—So thrilling."

The woman, the murderess, the vampire, the Bowel Hunter was completely and utterly crushed by the incredible mass.

Fresh blood splattered, mixing with the demon beast's bodily fluids. There was no sign of revival—only the aroma of death.

Garfiel let up a war cry, one that reached high into the sky, reverberating throughout the burning and crumbling mansion.

—So ended the battle between the Bowel Hunter and the Sanctuary's Shield.

CHAPTER 6

IT STARTED WITH REVENGE

1

Despite what the dramatic display of colors may have implied, the conflict unfolding was a highly advanced magical battle of precise technique.

With a staff swing, blades of wind were created and loosed at their target.

The invisible attack bore down on the intended victim's legs with enough force to slice apart steel. She had deliberately cast the spell out of sync with her gaze and breathing, even adding in a feint attack for good measure. These were—

"—!"

"Surely, this is not all you are caaaapable of?"

With great ease, her enemy—Roswaal—stopped the invisible attack with a flick of his toes.

Seeing that happen and realizing the level of skill that was required to make it possible made her throat freeze over. Dispelling magic by simply stomping on it was a feat far easier said than done. With the tips of his toes, Roswaal had rewritten the composition of the spell.

Through his Gate, he had altered the mana cast by another person without interfering with their Gate directly. Performing such an act in the middle of a battle with one's life on the line was not the action of a sane person.

The one who had done this was Roswaal L. Mathers—famed magic user, current lord of the House of Roswaal, and the man who still desired the title of the greatest court magician of the age.

"Now I'll send one right back at you."

Speaking in a casual tone, Roswaal moved both his hands and his mouth—deploying a trio of incantations from his fingers and lips alike.

This was not a simple combining of elements but simultaneously casting three different spells at once—a technique that verged on the realm of gods. It was an insane technique that all but required three brains to accomplish—and even this was not the true limits of his potential.

It was because she understood this more than anyone that the girl—Ram—was filled with energy as she evaded the resulting downpour of flames. It was then, when he was still not taking this seriously and using the full extent of his powers, that she had a chance of victory.

Ram responded to the three incoming fireballs, respectively colored red, blue, and green, by leaping backward and then intercepting them with more blades of wind. She would slice them away before shifting to a counterattack—but before she could, something upset her plans.

"—?!"

The red flame accepted her wind, acting as if she had poured oil onto it; the force of the flames increased as it transformed into a pillar of fire.

The wind split the blue flame apart, scattering it in all directions, which only further spread its destructive reach.

The green flame absorbed her wind, transforming into a snake of fire that crawled across the earth, causing havoc in its wake.

She responded to every one with all her strength. She vaulted over the intense flaming pillar, kicked off a large tree to evade the curtain of blue flames, and as the green flaming snake opened its jaws to catch Ram with its fangs once she landed—

"—Goodness, what petty tricks, Roswaal. You should know better."

A moment before being engulfed by the flaming snake, a calm voice slid into Ram's eardrums. In contrast to those quiet words, what occurred next was virtually overwhelming.

With its mouth still open, the burning snake froze over. The flying flames and the blazing pillar met similar ends. This was the antithesis of employing multiple spells simultaneously—using a single unstoppable spell to snuff everything out.

And the one who had accomplished this was the little cat

floating in the sky, short arms folded—the Great Spirit, Puck. The little cat cocked his head, turning his tail, which was as long as his body, toward Roswaal as he laughed.

"You might have learned a lot of tricks, but you'll need to go big to deal with the likes of me."

"How harsh. I take it that Lady Emilia developed her tendency to favor brute-force approaches from you?"

"No comment."

Crossing his arms in front of him, Puck did not give Roswaal's inconvenient assertion a reply. After that, Puck slowly lowered his altitude, landing on the shoulder of Ram, who was breathing hard, as he lined up right beside her head.

"Are you all right? Pushing yourself too hard will be bad for your body."

"…You may save your concern. After all, it is thanks to the Great Spirit's assistance that I can now manage this battle."

"No need to act tough. But when push comes to shove, *manage* is putting it nicely. You're an Oni girl without a horn, and I'm a handsome wild spirit without a host, but even with both of us at half strength double-teaming him, he's still toying with us."

Wiping some soot from her brow with a sleeve, Ram internally concurred with Puck's analysis. Earlier, she'd considered counterattacking while he was still toying with them, but she was a long way from even that much.

Yes, she was depleted from the battle with Garfiel, and Puck was in poor condition to assist, but more importantly—

"—You're strong, Roswaal. I have to admire how far a mere human has come after honing themselves."

"I am honored to receive your praise."

Roswaal offered an elegant bow in response to his assessment. It was a theatrical gesture, but by showing that he still had the poise to put on such a display, Roswaal demonstrated that even in this situation, the advantage was still very much his.

—The battle that had kicked off at the Witch's experimental facility deep in the Forest of Cremaldi had shifted, moving away from the building and into the woods.

The traces of the battle had already left the area around the facility a sorry-looking wasteland. There were scorch marks all over, blades of wind had toppled one tree after another, and countless trees had been flash-frozen.

Looking at all this, Roswaal then turned one eye—his yellow eye—toward Ram.

“I was indeed correct to bring this outside. If we had rampaged like this inside, that facility…or rather, that magic crystal would have been broken, which would have been quiiiite inconvenient.”

“

sealed away herself, so I thought it might be more convenient not to talk to her about them. But I was wrong."

As he spoke, Puck's voice lowered but slightly. The tenor of the little cat's voice, from which no emotion could normally be detected, held a perceptible timbre of deep indignation.

"You used my oaths to remove me as Lia's guardian, didn't you? That has to be why you cast a spell on Lia when we returned from the capital. That girl adores me, after all."

"…Strictly speaking, is it not better to say you are a smothering father who cannot leave the girl's siiiide?"

"When you put it that way, it's hard to deny being overprotective, huh?"

As Puck gave a shrug with his tiny shoulders, Roswaal did not deny it as he closed one eye—his blue eye.

"Fortunately, Lady Emilia was in low spirits from her argument with young Subaru. A little sabotage of your pact with Lady Emilia before departing for the Sanctuary was a trifling affair."

"On the other hand, a pact between spirit and spirit mage is sacred… It's not something that can be toyed with from the outside."

"Even so, I have lived with Beatrice for quite a long time, you seeee. For better or worse, creating loopholes in predetermined things is a specialty of mine—though that girl is too obstinate for such things."

As he spoke about pacts, Roswaal seemed to gaze into the distance for just a moment. The sight made the corners of Puck's black eyes fall ever so slightly as he crossed his short arms.

"You wanted Lia to stay depressed, didn't you?"

"Yes. That is why you needed to be removed. It is not an exaggeration to say that hindering you and young Subaru has caused me the most trouble of all. Subaru is a wild card; you are the only one who actually stands a chance of defeating me in a head-on battle."

"I don't like saying this, but it seems like both you and I expect a lot out of Subaru."

"Perish the thought—the expectations you and I have of him cannot possibly be comparable."

Instantly, Roswaal's tone hardened, seeming to lose a small amount of his composure.

As Roswaal expressed his expectations for Subaru, he pressed a

hand to his chest, clenching it into a fist. The gesture left Ram narrowing her eyes as she felt a throbbing pain in her own breast.

She knew how out of place it was, but Ram could not help but be jealous at how much he placed his hopes in Subaru.

“To me, he is the final key to bringing my greatest desire into reach. You, on the other hand, intend to put him to the grindstone to see if he is worthy of your beloved daughter. Your thinking is very different from mine.”

“—Don’t bark at me, Roswaal.”

As Roswaal’s voice became infused with fierce emotion, the cold hostility pouring down became frigid, glacial. Puck’s mouse-colored hair was standing up, bringing his presence into sharper relief as he continued:

“Just like you and your desire, I offered myself to Lia, the reason for my existence. Are you suggesting it’s easy for me to entrust Lia to someone else? Don’t get cocky, Witch’s apprentice.”

“…From that last part, I taaaake it you now remember things from prior to your pact?”

“I’m deducing a lot from the situation, you see, but considering whose forest this is, I have a pretty good idea who imposed this pact on me. I remember a man who spoke a lot like you, too.”

“

Roswaal's expression faintly stiffened. Just how much terrible significance did that single sentence possess?

And then—

"—Ul Goa."

"Because I hit the bull's-eye? How childish."

Without preparation or word of warning, fiery missiles shot forth. A towering wall of ice immediately intercepted them.

The sound of their collision rang out. A white shock wave flattened the trees of the forest, heralding that combat had recommenced.

2

"—Guess we're done buying time. Did that give your horn a breather?"

Puck's words, spoken with a deft wink the moment before she leaped, left Ram mentally clicking her tongue. She'd told him that she did not want him to worry about her; the little cat proved a poor listener. What annoyed her more than anything was the frailty of her own body that made the short rest just now a lifesaver.

But what of it? She would never breathe a single word of complaint about her body not being in tip-top condition.

What gave her any right to complain if she did not give it her all? If she lost without her feelings ever reaching him, she could whine and make excuses as much as she liked in the afterlife.

"—!! *El Fulla!!*"

Tightly clenching her teeth, she swallowed her frustration and readied her staff. Timed with an explosion of the ground, she flew into the air, touching her feet against a large tree's trunk to invert her posture as she converted her mana, unleashing it as blades of wind.

There was no lethal intent behind her attacks. However, even if she aimed to kill, it would not have resulted in as much as a scratch regardless.

Roswaal's response to the mighty blow was skilled and delicate. He rewrote the composition of the incoming magic, disassembling the wind blades into mere mana and capturing it with his own Gate to assign it a different form.

There was the threefold magic using both his hands and his mouth that he had displayed earlier—and on top of that, he used a

step to activate the magic he had internalized, unleashing four spells simultaneously in an outrageous display of magic.

"Grgh."

Twisting her lips, Ram put strength into the soles of her feet, which rested against the tree trunk, leaping away at full power. Instantly, the magic, which seemed sure to bite into that large tree, changed its course, curving to tail her as she fled.

"How…persistent!"

Spitting out those words, she slammed more wind into the pair of approaching fiery missiles, landed on the ground, drew them in before rolling backward at the last moment. This forced the one flame that did not keep up with the turn to slam into the ground, and she thrust her staff straight forward into the final, flaming shot.

"Now burst!!"

Using the tip of her staff to shred the mana apart, Ram moved so the blast from the fiery missile passed behind her. It was during that momentary opening that she—

"—It is too soon to relax."

Advancing with long strides, Roswaal drove a punch toward Ram's torso. This was a steel-like fist he had honed through extreme training completely unrelated to magical study. Its destructive power was so great that if it connected, it would affect not only bone but the internal organs as well; the instant it struck, a layer of ice caught the blow.

With a tremendous sound, the frozen shield shattered. Puck, the one who had created the instantaneous defense, whistled.

"So you've trained a whole lot in more than just magic!"

"I do whatever is necessary. If there is ample time, the only cost is the wearing down of the soul. Accordingly—"

Opening the fist that had struck the ice shield, Roswaal twisted his hips and lunged with a thrust of his palm. Of course, the ice kept him from reaching Ram—and yet, the impact shot through Ram's body nonetheless.

"Gah…!"

"That is a combat technique I learned from a ninja who hailed from the west long ago to strike from afar, reaching even past defenses. Effective, yes?"

Struck not by a direct hit but by a shock wave, Ram staggered backward. Her bones creaked, and her innards cried out. It was better than suffering a clean blow, but her body had a fatal

weakness and could not risk sustaining any injuries to begin with.

Her breathing was ragged, and her vision blurred. Ram's footing was unreliable. She lifted up her face when—

"—Get down!"

When she heard the voice, Ram forced down her rising head. Overhead, Puck—who had circled behind her—thrust out both hands, unleashing a giant pillar of ice toward Roswaal. The magical attack, with a mass rivaling that of the trunk of a hundred-year-old tree, forced even Roswaal to leap a good distance backward.

"It has been half a year since you first forced me to use this—!"

His voice rising as he offered a word of praise, Roswaal demonstrated the true worth of his unparalleled magical skill. With both hands, his lips, and alternating stomps of both his feet, he began casting—fivefold magic.

Unleashing five different spells at once, he melted, sliced, and pulverized the mighty pillar of ice to neutralize it. Scorching heat and absolute zero collided, enveloping the forest in white steam once more. As he employed this, Puck said:

"Can you stand? If you cannot, we will lose after the next move."

"…You say that like it's so easy, don't you?"

Wiping the blood spilling from the corner of her mouth, Ram braced herself with a sigh.

The fact that her condition had begun to deteriorate was proof that she had already gone beyond her limits.

With his pact with Emilia rescinded, Puck's power was greatly reduced. In the first place, he required a vast amount of mana just to stay corporeal. Without a contractor, all he could do to remain in their plane of existence and employ magic was to somehow make do with his reserves.

Even under these conditions, Puck was doing very well due to the skill he possessed. Part of her was tempted to rely on his brute strength to resolve this situation, but if Puck had really gone all out, the situation would have escalated to something unmanageable.

"I think it would have been beeetter for you if you had broken the taboo and used astral transformation."

"If I could absorb mana from the surrounding area without limit, this would end pretty quickly…but if I did that, I'd make Lia sad. If I don't protect what she wants to protect, that's putting the cart before the dragon."

“Bold words after having rescinded the pact yourself.”

“Do you think my temporary partner is any less brave?”

When the curtain of steam parted and Roswaal revealed himself, Puck flippantly responded to his sarcasm. The words made Roswaal glance at Ram, now all alone and in a tattered state, causing him to narrow his eyes.

“*Brave*, you say? Certainly, in terms of being ready to throw away everything for the sake of her objective, one might call her brave…but what she has done is too foolish to be worthy of the word.”

“

Unable to fathom where her words were going, Roswaal merely furrowed his brow with a questioning look. She let a pained smile slip.

Truly, she thought, it was as if this man did not see anything beyond his own feelings.

Therefore, surely, these words, too, would be completely astray from his expectations—

“Master Roswaal, Ram loves you.”

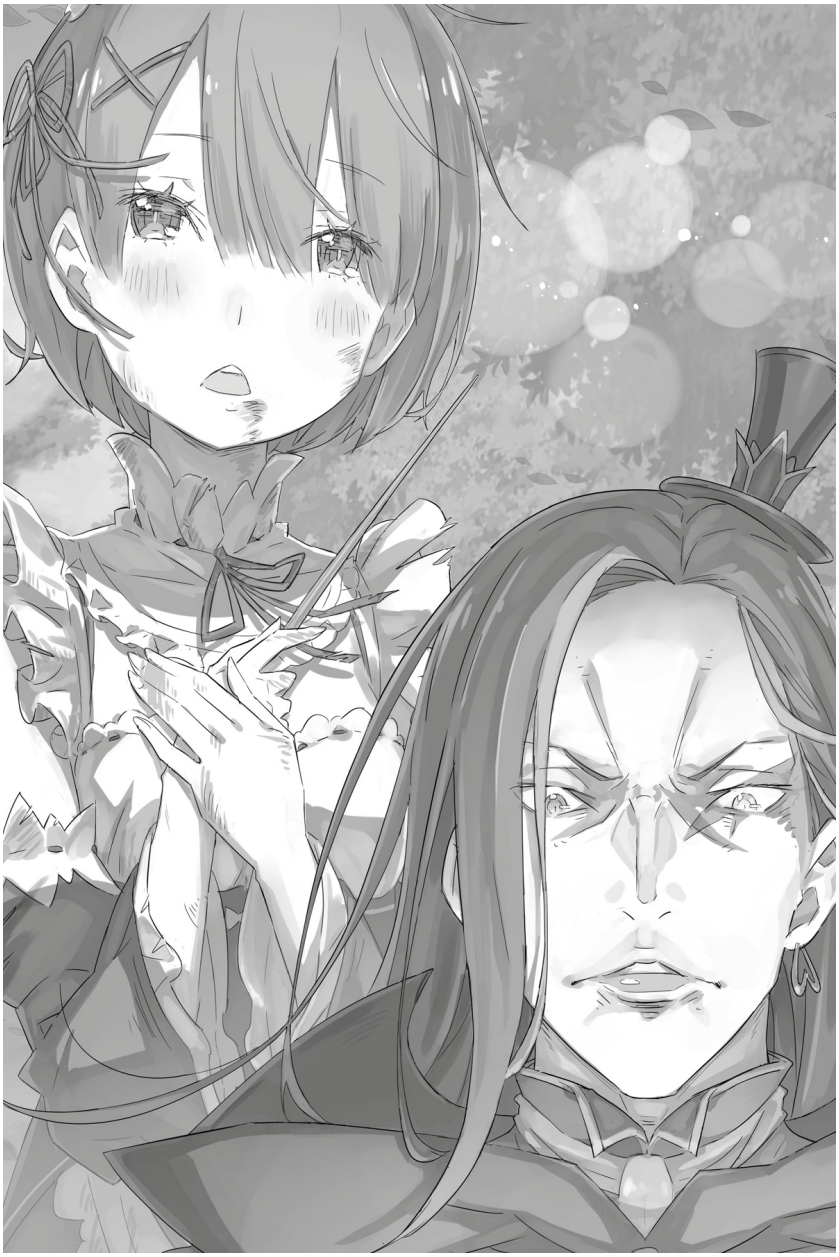
“

my homeland. However, now that I have fallen in love, it cannot be helped. Ram prioritizes her feelings before the dead."

Brazen and defiant, Ram pushed Roswaal into silence, leaving him unable to speak another word.

Therefore, with him silent, unmoving, and unable to believe her change of heart into love, she spoke.

"Ram will not allow you to become an empty shell. Obtaining you in that state is…meaningless."



"…You are contradicting yourself. Even if your feelings are as you say… No, especially if they are, I cannot comprehend your reason for turning against me at this juncture. If events deviate from the book, I… So why?!"

"That is why it must be now. It is only now that Barusu, Lady Emilia, and Garf have shaken Master Roswaal's heart to the point that I have a chance, likely to never come again."

Garfiel had strayed from Roswaal's predictions, Subaru had rejected his search for a coconspirator, and Emilia, who had conquered her own past, had made a promise with Ram—this was the one and only opportunity Ram would be provided in her lifetime.

"Using this one, final opportunity, I shall steal you from your obsession with the Witch—"

Roswaal clearly did not comprehend. Ram mentally mocked herself when she realized she loved even that expression of his.

There was no cure for this disease called love. The only path left to her was to forsake her passion until the moment of her death.

"—Great Spirit!"

"Very well—after all, in addition to my beloved daughter, I'm also the ally of all maidens in love."

Puck responded to Ram's call. Ram howled, not bothering to listen to flippant words unworthy of her ears.

Instantly, a freezing windstorm whipped around the forest. The time of the final gamble had arrived.

3

When the wind relented, Roswaal, whose reactions had been slow, held his breath, gritting his teeth at the spectacle.

Countless mirrors constructed of ice were floating in the air in the forest around him. The reflections of light and landscapes that filled Roswaal's field of vision weakened his situational awareness on the battlefield.

"Petty tricks—!!"

The countless mirrors were reflecting countless Rams and countless Pucks around the forest.

Judging he could not bide his time, Roswaal instantly decided

to deploy five instances of magic simultaneously, casting spells to manipulate the world around him.

The resulting flames licked at their surroundings as the forest with the mirrors of ice was turned to ash. But such incantations were insufficient to break up the coordination of demon and spirit.

As Roswaal unleashed more explosive flames, a shadow appeared overhead. He intercepted the flying figure with a fist, finding it surprisingly fragile. Roswaal blinked hard at the sensation of shattering. It was ice. One after another, ice sculptures shaped like people were being hurled at Roswaal from all directions.

He steadied himself and dug in his feet. The next moment, a ferocious gale blew, enveloping ice sculpture and ice pillar alike, blowing them all skyward. During that momentary opening, Roswaal wove his next spell as he leaped backward. Something caught him.

"From beneath…"

"It's not like I tossed them all for meowthing."

Drawing someone's attention upward to strike from below was a small, roundabout trick, but it was terrifyingly effective in a high-end magical battle.

With his movements momentarily but fatally limited, Roswaal focused on his surroundings. What would settle things here was a well-polished and wary mind—but it was then that he sensed something rapidly expanding.

It cannot be, thought Roswaal in shock. But even as he doubted it, the aura swelled larger.

Mowing down the trees and crushing the forest-turned-ash underfoot was a majestic creature so enormous that it seemed to reach the heavens. Its gargantuan frame, boasting fearsome fangs and claws, seemed on par with a small mountain.

Astral transformation—this was the nightmarish trump card of Puck the Great Spirit, known as the Beast of the End, one of the Four Great Spirits, and the one who destroyed Melaquera the Conciliator long ago.

Not allowing him to play that card was one of Roswaal's victory conditions.

For certain reasons, Roswaal was currently unable to employ his own trump card—sixfold magic. If he had to face Puck at full strength, his odds of winning would quickly crumble, and he would most likely wind up being overwhelmed in short order.

In this situation, Roswaal opted to attack with everything he could muster.

Turning to his rear, he glared toward the ferocious visage of the spirit that had undergone astral transforma—

"—What?!"

"—Boo! All I did was get bigger!"

He met the eyes of the enlarged spirit, who had retained his adorable face, and it was at this point that he realized it was a trap. However, it was too late.

Having never canceled his spell, Roswaal launched a flaming missile at the enormously expanded spirit that had become a giant target before him. The scheming spirit was naturally blown away. It would be impossible for him to return to the front lines immediately. All that remained was to use that opportunity to—

"—El Fulla!!"

The incantation caused concentrated winds to churn the ground, blanketing Roswaal's vision in rising clods of soil. Brushing the curtain of dirt aside with one arm, he used a long swipe of his leg to kick down one of the hurled ice statues that had been left standing.

Pushing the heavy object to the ground, Roswaal readied his mana once more, forging a new spell.

As he saw it, his greatest enemy, Puck, had been sent flying, and Ram's following, ferocious attack was overcome and finished. Without lowering his guard, he surveyed the forest, searching for wherever Ram was lurking—

—and Ram knew the exact moment Roswaal had looked away from her thanks to Clairvoyance.

"—Aaaghhh."

Concentrating on her forehead, intense pain dyed her vision pure red. Bloody tears flowed from Ram's bloodshot eyes as she stripped off the ice covering her and leaped up from her hiding spot beneath Roswaal's foot.

Impersonating an ice statue and being knocked down was all according to plan. Flesh and bones alike groaned throughout her entire body; a number of her tendons were torn. She ignored all this as her Oni blood seethed.

“

—The very next moment, a fiery missile hurled in anger sent the girl's tiny body flying.

4

A snowy landscape spread out in all directions.

Her breath was white. The cold stabbed at her skin. Setting eyes upon the falling snow, which blew almost horizontally, Emilia blinked hard.

What in the world had happened?

"—ady Emilia!"

Hearing a voice over the roaring and howling of the cold wind, Emilia darted out. She gingerly put a foot on the snow-covered steps before racing down toward the clearing. In this world hidden by so much white, she could barely see anything else, Emilia desperately searched for any sign of the people who were supposed to be here.

With the persistent flurries of snow buffeting her, she hoped everyone had taken shelter, but based on that voice she had just heard—

"Everyone! You shouldn't be out here like this! You need to stay in your…homes?"

When Emilia caught sight of people huddled shoulder to shoulder in the heavy snowfall, she raced over. Right as she began scolding them for foolishly deciding to remain outside in this weather, her words caught in her throat.

These were the people of the Sanctuary and Earlham Village—the hundred people who had patiently awaited Emilia's return. The situation was simply far beyond what she'd expected.

—They were surrounded by walls of ice on four sides, protecting them from the blowing snow.

"This is…"

"Lady Emilia has returned! Lady Emilia! Does this mean the Trials are over?!"

When Emilia came to a spontaneous halt, a youthful voice called to her from within the icy walls. Noticing this, the people awaiting Emilia's return looked at one another's faces, then let out an exultant shout.

"Th-thank you! I was able to come back safe and sound thanks to all of you! I'm…*really* grateful, but this is terrible! What

happened? What's with this snow?"

"It began falling but a short while ago. This much accumulated in no time at all."

Initially overwhelmed by their intense greetings, Emilia finally managed a response and asked a question of her own. That was when the face of Milde poked out from the press of bodies. She bowed quite deeply.

"We have endured the wind and snow thanks to these walls of ice. Therefore, I judged it was best we should remain in place. Please forgive me."

"That's… Mm-hmm, yes, I think you were right. In this kind of weather, there's no telling what might happen if you move around carelessly. But…"

"Even with the barrier lifted, this makes movement rather… difficult, I imagine."

Emilia gritted her teeth as Milde offered her assessment and let out a white breath.

It would've been best if they started ferrying these hundred people out of the Sanctuary after lifting the barrier. But this was impossible, since the wheels of the dragon carriages wouldn't allow them to travel in such heavy snow. That said, remaining in place was not an option. If they could at least reach a place that sheltered them from the wind—

"If it's too hard to return to the Cathedral, how about the tomb? The mana inside keeps it fairly warm, and there's no concern about it collapsing even if the snow piles *really* high."

"Go…inside it?"

"Yes, it's all right! All the dangerous mechanisms have stopped, so going in is no problem. Everyone, please head inside. Beyond that—You! I have a favor to ask!"

As the surprised Milde gave a nod, Emilia pointed to one of the men. This was the last individual she'd exchanged words with before challenging the final Trial. His eyes went wide, but he immediately stood straighter.

"—! U-understood! I'm Tokaku! Say whatever you wish!"

"Thank you, Mr. Tokaku. There have to be people who aren't here yet, right? I want you to gather them together. Have all the merchants and land dragons meet up at the tomb!"

Besides the hundred in front of the tomb, there was a small number of stragglers remaining in the Sanctuary. She could not

abandon them. She judged that if anything happened, it would be easier to protect everyone if they were in one place.

"…Leave it to me. I will see this task through!"

Tokaku nodded deeply in response to her instructions. Emilia had determined him to be the right person for the job after noting how he was physically stouter than anyone else present.

Then Emilia addressed the remaining concern, namely—

"Where did Miss Ryuzu go? Also, where are Ram and Roswaal…?"

She did not see the youthful-looking elder, who should have been at Milde's side. Ram, who had left to attend to her duty, had not returned yet, and Roswaal's absence left Emilia concerned for Ram's well-being.

"When the snow first began to fall, the elder left, saying she had to go see her family. We tried to stop her, but…"

"Family? Family… Did she mean Miss Shima?"

The mention of *family* left Emilia with the mental image of Ryuzu's seemingly identical twin sister coming to mind.

Ryuzu and Shima were not sisters, strictly speaking, but that was how Emilia conceptualized their relationship. And according to what she'd heard from Ram, Shima was supposed to have been resting at home at the moment.

"But Miss Ryuzu's so little herself. She should have just asked someone to help her instead of going alone…"

"Er, pardon me, Lady Emilia…but who is this Shima of whom you speak?"

"Ehhh?! You don't know her?! Why not?!"

It wasn't just the people of Earlham Village cocking their heads at the mention of the unfamiliar name but the residents of the Sanctuary as well. It seemed not a single person present had even heard of her.

Emilia sensed there had to have been some reason behind this strange confusion, but the unexpected development left her feeling anxious nonetheless.

"I've actually met her, so she must be… Anyway! I'll go look for both of them! Or is that three…four people now? Anyway, I'll look for them!"

On top of Ryuzu and Shima, Ram and Roswaal further added to Emilia's list of people to question. Their circumstances no doubt differed, but Emilia wanted to speak to all of them in a safe place.

“After that… These walls of ice! I want to speak to whoever made these. If there’s someone who specializes in magic, I’d be happy if that person would help Mr. Tokaku, but…”

Pointing to the snow-repelling walls of ice, Emilia let her gaze wander as she searched for the person responsible. Had it not been for those ice walls, it would have taken her far longer to ascertain the situation, and organizing everyone’s movements would have been exceedingly difficult.

This led her to think more aid from this person would be a huge help. But her words made the people—in particular, the people of Earlham Village—look at one another’s faces.

“…Lady Emilia, was this not your doing?”

“Eh? Me? I didn’t do it, but…”

The assertion blindsided Emilia, who widened her eyes in shock. She remained surprised as Milde continued to speak.

“However, that spirit said to thank Lady Emilia…or Lia, rather.”

Being called *Lia* made Emilia’s breath catch.

“Just as the snow began falling, a tiny spirit flew over the clearing, making these walls in no time at all. As Lady Emilia is a spirit mage, I was completely convinced that…”

“Puck…”

The only one who called Emilia *Lia* was that adorable spirit. He was the sole one she could think of who would have tried to help in a place like this whether he liked it or not.

Emilia’s heart was trembling from Milde’s explanation as she touched an icy wall. She thought if he was the one who had made them, there might be some trace, some lingering feeling that she might sense through her touch.

But the instant she touched the wall, the sensation shooting through Emilia’s hand was not adorable at all.

“—Ah.”

Something flowed into Emilia through the palm she’d set on the wall. That instant, in a gap between the roar of the cold, blowing wind, she lifted her head, hearing something that sounded like the very world had split apart.

—With snow-blurred vision, Emilia saw a tower formed of ice standing in the white-covered forest off in the distance.

The tower of ice, manifesting that very moment, was an invitation, a guidepost for Emilia.

You still have a job to do, don’t you, Lia?

She clenched her teeth tightly, feeling as if she heard the voice of family who should have been forever by her side.

Realizing intuitively that she needed to rush over to that place, Emilia turned back toward the hundred present.

"Seems like I have to head that way—could you wait here where it's safe?"

"—We will do as we promised before the Trial. Lady Emilia, be careful."

With those words as her send-off, Emilia smiled, then turned toward the tower of ice in the forest.

There was no hesitation in her steps. Of course there wasn't.

Puck would never lead Emilia astray.

5

The unconscious Ram looked like she was merely asleep.

"…Ram?"

Picking up her listless body from the ground, Roswaal called out the girl's name. There was no reply. Normally, Ram would make Roswaal's words her first priority, putting all other things aside, but now…

—Now she was on death's door, and the one responsible was none other than Roswaal.

"So you lost your temper when she burned the book. Not like you at all. But she was prepared for even this. I think she really is a strong girl."

Puck looked down at Ram's charred form as he spoke, his oversize form having long since dissipated. After taking a direct hit from a fiery shot, his mana-composed body was faintly thinner than before. But the respect in his voice was genuine, and he surely retained enough power to flatten the dazed Roswaal.

However, Puck did no such thing, seemingly content to hover silently as the battle was postponed.

"…Ram."

Roswaal paid Puck no heed as he embraced the girl's slender body and called her name.

He could not remember what he had been thinking until he had picked up Ram's prone body a moment before.

He still could not comprehend why Ram had confronted him, exhausting her strength until she was on the brink of death.

To Roswaal, Ram was a useful and convenient pawn. She was invaluable in terms of strength and mental prowess; more than anything, her vengeful heart, which was aimed at Roswaal, made her flawless.

He'd genuinely thought he was fine granting another control over his final moments…as long as it was her.

With her vengeful heart unceasingly continuing to blaze within her, she would obey him until the very end, at which point he would offer himself to her, no longer caring that his soul would be seared away by the fires of her revenge.

She had betrayed him—in a way he had never fathomed and for a reason he did not comprehend.

"Ram, why did you…?"

Had she changed? Had her feelings taken a new shape? He could not understand.

All of one's emotions ought to continue in the same manner from the moment when they glimmered at their strongest.

If you truly loved someone, if you truly hated someone, that passion, that radiance, should remain constant for eternity.

It was holding on to hopes and desires for a long, long time that made them truly genuine. Over long months and years, feeling hardened so that nothing and no one could undermine them. That was the ideal.

Garfiel's hateful heart toward what rested beyond the Sanctuary should never have been broken.

Time should not have healed Emilia's aversion and regrets toward the past.

And that went for Ram's inexhaustible hatred and vengeful heart toward Roswaal all the more.

Master Roswaal, Ram loves you.

"You've lost, Roswaal."

The confession of love had been burned into his ears like a curse.

Even that moment, in his arms with her eyes closed, the girl's lips were pursed with an expression of emotion that should not have existed.

Roswaal made a faint noise in his throat as he mulled and deciphered these things in his mind.

"She has fulfilled her goal, albeit by the barest of threads."

"

“Soon, Lia will also finish the Trials. You lost the book you depended on. I understand why you were so obsessed. But…”

This is the end, the spirit was saying. It was the second demand for surrender Roswaal had received that day.

The first came from Subaru Natsuki and the second from the Great Spirit. But the difference between the first and the second was the power to resist that remained within him.

Roswaal found he could not bear to even move his limbs. Even if the reason for his condition was unclear, facts were facts. That moment, he lacked the strength with which to defy the spirit’s words.

—But this applied only to the Roswaal at that particular moment in time.

The cold wind carried the stench of flames and the thick aroma of something scorched. Vestiges of battle raged through the forest as Puck watched Roswaal hold the weakened Ram in his arms. It was then that the spirit suddenly noticed.

A sprinkle of white snowflakes crept into his field of vision, melting and vanishing before they even fell to the ground.

“Snow…? It can’t be. I mean, you’re right here…”

As he looked up at the flurry of snow, Puck’s voice quivered at the presence of heavy clouds filling the sky.

—Using a magic crystal as a catalyst, the weather had been changed, causing snow to fall upon the Sanctuary.

This had been Roswaal’s aim, the act he had intended to perform in adherence to what was written in his book of knowledge. Preventing this from happening was why Ram and Puck had joined together, and they had even succeeding in consigning the book of knowledge to the flame.

But their plan had fallen one step short of catching up to Roswaal’s meticulousness.

“—You got us good. You’d already made preparations to call the snow clouds before the battle had even begun, didn’t you? All you needed to do after was to drag it out.”

Before the battle had kicked off, Roswaal had etched the spell’s formula directly into the magic crystal, then pulled the pair away and diverted their attention while it activated. Since the spell needed to be kept active full-time, this prevented Roswaal from using his trump card, sixfold magic, which had made the battle far more arduous for him. But—

“The snow will fall. It’ll be just as Subaru feared. I’m going to head off and postpone the worst.”

“

know what to do about the increasingly cold body that lay within his arms.

“In accordance with the book of knowledge, I have made the snow fall… What do I do now?”

At this point, Roswaal had fulfilled and finished his role for “this time around.”

In the first place, it had been an attempt he would have abandoned long before if not for the wager with Subaru. From the very beginning, there had been no special objective worthy of the word—even that gamble occupied but a fragment in the corner of his mind.

To Roswaal, it was no longer necessary to do any more. What was important was the conclusion that the events in the Sanctuary would reach: The snow would fall, and the barrier would be lifted.

If these were achieved. If these were achieved—what was supposed to happen, exactly?

“Ram… Ahhh, that’s right. Ram.”

The sound of Ram’s breathing had already vanished. Half out of habit, Roswaal touched her forehead.

Her forehead was drenched with blood that flowed from the white scar where her horn had once been. This was the result of forcibly entering her demonic form. Wiping it clean, Roswaal subconsciously poured colorless mana into the wound.

It was a ritual he had continued all that time, for Ram’s body required mana to circulate within her every bit as much as her Oni blood.

It was not out of any conscious thought.

It was simply that Roswaal subconsciously understood the only way to keep Ram’s life tethered was to gamble on Ram’s own Oni vitality. He never questioned whether to save her.

Ram had to live.

She was Roswaal’s fate. His last moments needed to be ended by her hand. For the sake of fulfilling his objective… For the sake of what would come after he fulfilled his objective…Ram had to live.

“Teacher… I…”

His mind felt completely lost. Only the sight of the Witch who had taught him filled his mind.

“I…I! What should I do, Teacher…?! Teacher…please tell me. I still don’t understand anything… Please show me the way, Teacher…!”

Even as he tried to sustain Ram's tenuous hold on life, his anger toward her betrayal had not faded.

Even though he understood there was no longer anything left to guide him, he still yearned to see that promised day.

The falling snow mercilessly daubed Roswaal's and Ram's bodies with fresh powder.

The white was all-encompassing, causing everything to vanish.

—Yet, at no point did he think that he would be satisfied with such an ending.

6

Emilia earnestly raced down the snowy path as she headed toward the tower of ice standing tall in the forest.

Letting out sharp white breaths, her speed was unthinkably fast given the poor footing, but Emilia was not running *on* the poor footing. With each step, her foot made contact with an icy platform; then she would use her heels to launch herself to the next one. This way, she made considerable progress in a short amount of time.

"I! Did it! There we go!"

Of course, the icy footholds resting on top of snow made for quite a slippery path. But to Emilia, raised in the frozen Great Elior Forest, this was nothing. He knew that, too.

Armed with this knowledge, the spirit had created this footing without the slightest hesitation.

Steadily, she crept deeper into the white forest. Emilia did not think of this as cause for concern. She would believe in what she wanted to, rely on what she wished to. With those thoughts in her mind, she was invincible.

Subaru. Otto. Garfiel. Frederica. Ryuzu. Shima. The villagers. The people of the Sanctuary—Ram. Puck. Herself. She believed in them.

Hence, it was not long before she arrived at a white structure deep within the forest.

"There are eddies of mana here… Is this the cause of the snow falling?"

Emilia let out those words along with a white breath as she faced the snow-buried ruin before her.

Standing beside the white ruin was the spire of ice that had led her to it. Like a person awaiting the arrival of his guest, it instantly

shattered, the mana returning now that its goal had been fulfilled. As the scattering mana glittered and danced in the sky, she was drawn to the open, yawning entrance leading into the structure.

Furthermore, as if to guide Emilia within, instead of words, she felt Puck's feelings urging her onward.

"—! It's *really* smelly. Animal repellent…? Besides that, this thick mana is a spirit repellent… Someone really didn't want anyone going inside."

The pungent odor pricked her nostrils as the concentrated mana, something she had no resistance to, clouded her consciousness. The thorough means to keep people out was proof enough that this was the nexus of the disturbance.

"—Puck's waiting. I have to go."

After hesitating for one moment, Emilia steeled herself and stepped into the ruin.

Snow was coming in from the cracks in the ceiling, and so, too, was the air indoors bitingly cold. There were a number of small rooms along the path, but Emilia headed to the back without paying them heed—that was where she felt a precious spirit's presence.

Then, at the very back of the structure, she made a slight sound in her throat when she spotted a room from which a faint blue light trickled forth.

—For it was there that contained an unbelievably large magic crystal and a throng of girls all around it.

"…Miss Ryuzu?"

"Lady Emilia?! Why have you come here…? No."

When Emilia called out, it was…probably Ryuzu who turned toward her with a nervous look. She could not say for sure only because the other girls in attendance—all of them—bore the same face as Ryuzu.

There were twenty or so, and Emilia could not conceal her inner turmoil from seeing a line of girls with the same face.

She was just now discovering that not only did Ryuzu have Shima for a sister, but she also had so many, many others…

"So many… Miss Ryuzu's mother must have had it *really* tough…"

"I'll save the replica explanation for later! At any rate, please hold me back!"

"Stop you, Miss Ryuzu…?"

It was taking Emilia a while to grasp the situation. But then she

noticed the throng of Ryuzu sisters was impeding Ryuzu's actions, preventing her from moving forward. Then Emilia realized the girl standing in front of the giant magic crystal looked like Shima.

Shima's expression, somehow sad and tragic, sent a chill up Emilia's spine.

Recalling the Trials of the past, the future, and the unknowable present, Shima's face bore the same resolve as the people she had seen in those visions, determining their own fates—

"That's you, Miss Shima, right? What in the world are you doing? What is this place?"

"Lady Emilia, the fact that you are here safe and sound means the Trials have ended, yes? In other words, all is prepared for us to fulfill our final duty… Young Gar's gamble has paid off."

"—! There's a Miss Ryuzu inside the magic crystal?"

As Shima heaved a heavy sigh, there was a person resting within the magic crystal behind her. It was a little girl with her eyes closed and clutching her knees—yet another who looked just like Ryuzu.

Except for Emilia, there was no one present except a group of girls with the same face. Being seized by the abnormality, the creepiness of the situation would have been normal. But Emilia stepped to the fore.

"Did you come to bring the girl out of the magic crystal? Can I just take all of you to the tomb with me?"

"—I am utterly amazed that you could look at this situation and have those be the first words out of your mouth."

Emilia's words made Shima's eyes bulge. She was so taken aback, the tone of her voice changed slightly.

"Mm, it's all right. I may not look it, but I have a lot of power, so if I make an ice sled to ride, I think I could pull all of you with me."

From what Emilia could tell, the magic crystal was rather large, but with the proper preparation, transporting it was surely possible. With this many people helping, even if they had been ordinary children, they could get it moving with some hard work and planning.

If that's what it took to wipe that tragic, forlorn look off Shima's face, she'd work as hard as it took.

However, Emilia's suggestion caused Shima to say "no," shaking her head with a slight smile.

“Your feelings make me happy, but that will not be necessary. I have not come here to take our sleeping ancestor inside the magic crystal with us…but to bring her duty to an end.”

“Duty to an end…?”

“This magic crystal is the core of the barrier enveloping the Sanctuary. The ritual was activated from the tomb, and this core acted as the catalyst to give the barrier form. In other words, when both sites have ceased to function, the Sanctuary’s role as a place of shelter shall end; it shall be set free, so to speak. Lady Emilia, you have broken the ritual. Therefore, what remains is…”

Emilia, who had destroyed the ritual in the coffin with the intent of lifting the barrier, was taken by surprise. If this was true, this ceremony was necessary and unavoidable, but—

“Er, does it have to be done right now? Right now, snow is falling *really* heavily outside, so I wanted to assemble everyone at the tomb…”

“If, by any chance, this facility was to be destroyed or its administrators lost, it would become an unsalvageable situation. That is why we, the administrators of the Sanctuary, the personalities representing the replicas, are also its keys.”

Shima was dubbing herself a key that they could not afford to lose. Emilia intuitively understood this was likely an undeniable fact.

People had their roles to play, just like the roles Emilia had there in the Sanctuary and in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The same went for Shima, and she was attempting to fulfill hers.

“Lady Emilia, take this.”

Detecting a shift in Emilia’s expression, Shima tossed something her way. Instantly catching it, Emilia let out an “ah…” at what had fallen into her palm.

This was a piece broken off from the magic crystal, a tiny fragment containing tremendous power. More than anything, Emilia felt a pulse run through the high-purity magic crystal: that of the precious spirit who had led Emilia to this place where they ought to have met each other…

“Puck, is that you?”

“The Great Spirit preceded your arrival, destroyed the seals, and apparently delayed the spell’s activation. He used all his strength to save the people in the settlement.”

Shima's explanation made Emilia notice the vestiges of an extremely complex formula at the center of the magic crystal. Its overwhelmingly dense magical composition rivaled that of the spell with the coffin at its core.

Ordinarily, a magical bulwark sufficient to burn one to a crisp would have prevented all entry into that room. The fact that she could read the composition of the unraveled formula was not due to the caster's lack of skill but because it had been constructed in a rush. Indeed, a surprised gasp escaped her when she realized it had been hastily assembled yet still possessed such vast power.

The being who had removed the magical bulwark, leaving her a path forward, was doubtlessly the Great Spirit who continued to sleep in the magic crystal fragment in Emilia's palm.

"You opened up the magical barrier, protected everyone from the falling snow, and did something reckless just to tell me about this place… How many other unreasonable things did you do besides that…?"

There was no reply to her question. Having ensured Emilia's arrival, Puck had fallen completely silent.

He had arbitrarily rescinded their pact in order to wrench open the lid on Emilia's memories. She'd already come to terms with him vanishing somewhere far off and for any reunion to be a long ways down the road.

However, Puck had used his vanishing existence to keep pushing, lending her a paw until the very, very end. As a result, he had lost his power and had fallen asleep—a long, long sleep inside that fragment.

"…Lady Emilia, you and Young Su have borrowed much outside power besides his. If this opportunity has been granted as a consequence, it should fall to me to bring our duty to an end."

Emilia, closing her eyes as she clutched the tiny magic crystal against her chest, lifted up her head. When she looked, Shima was touching a hand to the large magic crystal with a soft, pleasant smile on her face.

Somehow, when she looked at that smile, it overlapped with that of the now-departed Puck's and the one Fortuna showed in her final moments.

The tragic resolve she had sensed earlier was because here, Shima had found meaning in the fulfillment of her duty.

"Duty, duty… I understand our duty! But why must it be you?!"

That instant, while Emilia stayed silent, Ryuzu's voice cried out raggedly. Shima's smile drove her to make her earnest plea even as the other girls held her arms and legs tight.

Tears were welling in her blue eyes—tears that spoke of compassion, regret, and a powerful sense of responsibility.

"We have forsaken you for these past ten years. You were removed from your duty as administrator, leaving you to live alone this whole time…and yet, after all that, now you take this duty upon yourself?"

"…I suppose you have a point. Were I truly alone for ten years, I might well have borne a grudge."

Lowering her eyes, Shima reminisced about the long months and years to which Ryuzu referred. Emilia did not know what passed between the two. However, as she reminisced about those ten lonely years, Shima smiled.

Ryuzu had called them ten years she had spent each and every day alone, yet Shima had found sufficient reason to smile.

"But I was not alone. I was with my adorable grandson and grew to know him well. I was able to watch him grow up and become strong, bit by bit. And now that child… Garf, our grandchild, has gone outside, standing tall and proud."

"

interior.

The flash of white seemingly melted the world away, blotting it out. After so very, very long, that pale, warm light heralded the Sanctuary's true end—it was the final demise of the cradle of the gentle Witch.

“

happening in the Sanctuary was finished. Emilia was sure of it.

Therefore, for that instant only, Emilia wanted to rely on them to fulfill their responsibilities, so that she, who was lacking in so many things, could reach the place she so dearly wanted to go—

"Ram! Roswaal!!"

There were gaps between snapped-off trees, furrows of overturned earth, and the unnatural snowfall—when she saw the man and woman nestled close in front of that backdrop, Emilia raced over without a moment to spare.

With the silent girls in tow, Emilia slid over frozen snow and bounded toward the copse of the trees. When she reached her destination and examined Roswaal, she realized he was half-covered in snow, not making the slightest movement as he gazed into the distance.

Emilia violently shook his shoulder as she harshly called out to him.

"Hey, Roswaal! Are you listening? Roswaal, I'm talking to you! You can't stay in a place like this! You need to get to the tomb right away… This isn't the time to freeze!"

When she shook him, snow that had accumulated on Roswaal's head fell away. When she caught a glimpse of the side of his face her shaking had uncovered, it stole Emilia's breath away.

She sensed no life in those eyes, no gravitas from his expression… He looked so very frail.

"—! Ram?"

Frightened by Roswaal's lack of reaction, Emilia called out to the girl sleeping in his arms. But seeing her slumbering face, she immediately sensed something was wrong. There was no sign of the snow accumulating on her cheek melting away…

"Ram? Ram!"

Emilia desperately called out to that sleeping face, trying to see if that would wake her. However, there was no response. Of course there was no reply, but her eyelids didn't even twitch. When she touched the girl, her cheek and her lips seemed abnormally cold. It was almost as if—

"That can't be…!"

Brushing that grim possibility aside, Emilia put a hand into Ram's clothes. When she touched the girl's diminutive, cold-feeling chest to make sure, her palm felt a faint reaction…the weakest of heartbeats.

"—She's alive! It'll be all right! We can still make it! Roswaal!"

Having found a ray of hope, Emilia looked back at Roswaal. His hand still touched her forehead, but his eyes remained vacant and distant. That same moment, she understood.

A vast amount of mana was coursing from Roswaal's palm into Ram's forehead. By feeding her considerably weakened body that mana, he had helped maintain her weak hold on life, if just barely.

"You saved Ram, didn't you…?"

Recognizing this, Emilia sank into thought. Ram's condition was poor. Under normal circumstances, it would most likely not be a good idea to move her at all. But there was a reason she could not simply leave them there.

Ryuzu had informed her of the terrifying demon beasts closing in on them.

The heavy snow was a foreboding omen, and with each moment that passed, danger drew closer to the Sanctuary.

Emilia truly had made the right decision to gather everyone together at the tomb. There, she could set up a defensive perimeter and secure the people who she *had* to protect. It wasn't an issue of whether she could. She'd do it no matter what.

Even if she could not borrow Roswaal's strength, Emilia possessed the combat capability to do it alone.

"Anyway, Roswaal, let's bring Ram with us. These girls will help, so we'll evacuate you both to the tomb. Roswaal, don't give up on treating Ram…"

"…s fine."

"—Huh?"

Emilia gazed in astonishment, doubting whether she'd correctly heard the raspy voice her eardrums had caught.

To Emilia, that was how unexpected those words were. That was to what extent she found them unbelievable. Emilia stood there dumbfounded as Roswaal repeated them.

"It's fine…"

The voice seemed ready to vanish.

As a matter of fact, the words were immediately taken and swept away by the cold wind, scattering them aside.

He seemed to be muttering under his breath. It was not even clear if Roswaal himself heard the words.

But that weak, chafed voice of resignation certainly reached her.

Hence, Emilia—

"—Don't you dare decide something like that on your own!!"

Emilia grasped Roswaal's collar, her voice shaking with anger.

The force made him cry out in pain. Emilia glared at his face as if she was ready to bite it off.

Indignation rested in her violet eyes as she howled:

"It's fine?! What do you mean, *fine*?! There's *nothing* fine about this! There's not a single thing here that's fine! Don't you dare give up and try to end this on your own! For me, Ram, and you, Roswaal, there's no way any of this is fine!!"

"—Uagh."

"I finished the Trials! The past I was afraid of seeing! The happy future that could have been! The miserable future that might come who-knows-when! I saw it all! Even so, I decided to walk this path… Yes, I decided! And I'm walking it now!"

She howled. She kept on howling.

Uncontainable anger bubbled up from deep within Emilia, an anger beyond anything she had ever known.

Yes. That was it. What a weak voice she had and what pathetic answers. She'd been spoiled to the core. Could it really be called living life if it ended the moment someone gave up?

Roswaal's cheeks stiffened. He squirmed in an apparent attempt to avoid her gaze. This was not out of anxiousness for Ram as she rested in his arms; he simply wanted to escape the look in her eyes.

This, she would not allow. Grasping his chin, Emilia turned him to face her.

"When you're having a conversation, look who's talking to you in the eye!"

"—!"

"If you don't look someone in the eye, you can't tell when someone's desperately trying to think of something. If someone's not looking into your eyes, they can't tell why you want to do something. So look into my eyes, listen to my voice, stand up, and come with me—don't give up."

Roswaal blinked. His differently colored eyes seemed to have realized something.

His small lips twitched. However, they did not form a sound. Nonetheless, they possessed tangible…will.

"—Ah."

"I won't let anyone say *it's fine*. As long as we're alive, there'll

be none of this *it's fine* stuff—that's why I don't want to give up on anyone, not anymore!"

She stood up. That instant, Emilia whirled around, thrusting her arm toward the forest behind her.

She froze to the bone the demon beast leaping toward her, enveloping it in blustering snow and glacial cold.

The creature she had caught was white, small enough to fit in her palm. However, this was a ferocious being with gleaming red eyes.

—It had arrived. The demon beast known as the Great Rabbit had finally come.

"They're here… Yeah, because I'm a Witch. Or is it because Puck is here?"

The Witch who had frozen the Great Elior Forest or the Great Spirit who had served as her father figure—either one made delicious feed for the horde of demon beasts raising a racket with their teeth gnashing as they steadily drew nearer.

Touching a hand to her chest, Emilia said a prayer on the new magic crystal fragment that hung from her neck.

—Not a prayer yearning for deliverance but a vow that she would see things through.

"Take care of Roswaal and Ram. Everything will be fine as long as you can make it back to the tomb… I'll protect everyone without fail!"

As Emilia decisively issued instructions to Ryuzu's sisters, the girls immediately did as they were told.

It was their role to obey this temporary master, who just so happened to have the qualifications to order them—but it was up to Emilia to play the role assigned to her more valiantly than any other in the four centuries of the Sanctuary's history.

Using magic to scatter the pursuing demon beasts, Emilia cut open a path toward the tomb and raced ahead. The girls followed close behind her, looking like retainers who had sworn fealty to their king.

—For in Emilia's footsteps and her gaze, there was no hesitation. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 7

—CHOOSE ME

1

It was immediately after being separated from Ryuzu that Beatrice began waiting for That Person.

Having lost Ryuzu Meyer, who had established the Sanctuary at the cost of her own existence, they had endured against Hector, Devil of Melancholy. Her wait began immediately following that.

"Beatrice. I entrust you with administering the archive containing my knowledge. Until the appointed hour comes, I want you to protect the archive's store of knowledge as its guardian so that none may ransack it."

"—Eh?"

Called to her mother's study, Beatrice opened her eyes wide, bewildered and shaken as she was commanded to keep watch.

She'd been certain that her mother—the Witch Echidna—would command her to risk her life fighting to support her in a coming battle. Beatrice could only widen her eyes at being handed a role she'd never even conceived of.

"Fortunately, as a master of Dark magic, you wield Passage, which connects an isolated space to familiar places… Yes, let us call this space the archive of forbidden books. Therein, the writings that contain all the knowledge I possess shall be collected and preserved. This is what I want you to protect."

"W-wait…"

"You may link the archive to Roswaal's mansion. That child… It's more than likely his Gate was crushed in the previous battle and he'll never be able to demonstrate his genius again. Even so, I am certain he will be of great assistance to you. I want both of you to

get along nicely and await my return…”

“Wait just a… Could you hold on for a moment, I wonder?!”

As Echidna ignored her shock and kept pushing on with the conversation, Beatrice desperately asked her to slow down.

She could not comprehend Mother’s words—No, her instincts screamed she could not allow herself to comprehend. Echidna’s farseeing, far-reaching plans were well beyond the ken of any normal person. Her words were always absolute, so never once before had Beatrice even considered interrupting them.

That was precisely why she interjected now. If the words ahead were also absolute, she would forever regret allowing them to be spoken.

“Mother…what are you saying? D-do I even understand what this archive of forbidden books means, I wonder?! Betty…wants to go with Mother!!”

“Unfortunately, even if you are with me, I can do nothing against a foe even Roswaal could not handle. If you and I are both destroyed, what will happen to the knowledge I have accumulated? I have a duty to see it inherited.”

And having someone inherit this knowledge was the duty she was leaving to Beatrice by entrusting her with the archive of forbidden books.

Instantly, Beatrice came to a realization. She finally understood the meaning of the Dark magic she had so passionately studied, the purpose of her affinity for it.

“It cannot be… Betty’s power…was for this?”

“

future, made Beatrice draw in her breath as she accepted the book.

If she'd had this before, leading her onto the proper path, would the words she was hearing from her mother that very moment, and what she should do next, be written within?

"There are two copies. The first, I give to you, and the second, I will give to Roswaal. He should make the proper arrangements henceforth. I am sorry this is so arbitrary, but I want you to do as I say."

When Beatrice took in all of Mother's words, she realized it was already too late.

No matter how much Beatrice cried, clung, and wailed *don't go*, her mother would not change her ways.

—For Echidna, the Witch of Greed, had chosen to be a Witch ahead of being a mother.

"Let us speak about your term as guardian of the archive. Even if I do not return, the archive must be opened to someone at some point. The one suitable to inherit my knowledge will surely come one day. You will know when the time has come."

"Come for Betty…?"

"As a placeholder, let us use the words *That Person*. Your term will last until That Person arrives at the archive of forbidden books and tells you that your duty has come to an end—this is my final request."

Her final request—the ring of those words made Beatrice look up at Echidna's black eyes once more.

Her mother's…expression was ever-unchanged. And yet, for the briefest of moments, an unknown emotion passed over it.

"Betty—be well."

2

After parting ways with Echidna, Beatrice's losses and farewells continued.

Just as Mother had told her to, Beatrice took up residence at the Roswaal family's home. There, she used her mastery of Dark magic to construct the archive of forbidden books, filled it with her mother's knowledge, and called herself its librarian.

Immersing herself in that role, she turned a blind eye to all the despair remaining in the world around her.

"Copying the soul… Overwriting the vessel…"

At some point, Roswaal began to frequently visit the archive of forbidden books. But his only interest was the bookshelves of knowledge within, so he and Beatrice exchanged hardly any words.

Beatrice wondered when the youth, once too lanky and stubble covering his face, had become an adult?

He bore a staff and looked like he had trouble walking—he had suffered unhealed wounds during the battle with that devil, putting Roswaal's body into a state that made even day-to-day life arduous. In spite of this, ever since he had become able to walk again, he had terribly abused that inconvenient body, whittling his life away as he remained turned toward the bookshelves.

"Hellooo, Beatrice. I shall intruuude upon you today once more."

"…Do as you please."

By rights, the archive of forbidden books was a place she shouldn't have allowed anyone into.

Echidna's request was for That Person to eventually come and inherit her knowledge. It wasn't an open library that just anyone could peruse until That Person came. Everyone else belonged in the Sanctuary.

But even so, Roswaal, and only Roswaal, was the exception.

He alone was special, the only other one to whom, like Beatrice, Echidna had entrusted a vital mission.

And to Beatrice, he was the only reminder that the days she treasured existed without a doubt. Yes, to Beatrice, only he—

"

mother.”

—He smiled as his eyes, one yellow, one blue, reflected her expressionless face.

3

Little worth mentioning happened after that.

The heads of the Mathers family continued to call themselves Roswaal, inheriting the name from previous generations.

This was apparently so they would never forget to revere Echidna, Beatrice’s departed mother. Even though she understood this, she could not treat them like she had the first generation.

Of course she couldn’t. To Beatrice, there was only one Roswaal she could consider special.

All others were fakes. To maintain the archive of forbidden books, she needed them to provide access to the mansion. Furthermore, even if they offered other amenities, she wanted nothing beyond that, as it was a place for the sake of That Person alone.

And so for the sake of her guiding mission, she was alone for a long, long time.

Four hundred years passed—and in that time, the number of people who reached the Archive were few.

“Your power is simply marvelous. Please, by all means, lend me your power as a spirit.”

Shut up. Go away.

“Even if someone ordered it, making you stay all alone in a place like this is unforgivable.”

As if you understand? This is the precious duty Mother entrusted to me.

“Knowledge should be spread far and wide. If the vast wisdom accumulated here was shared, just how many people do you think it would help? Surely, you understand this.”

I care nothing for the many. Betty only wanted to save the one.

“Let’s go together. You’ve already done enough. Let me save you.”

There is only one person who can save Betty now.

Both men and women said all sorts of things to Betty, guardian of the archive of forbidden books. In the end, they all invariably asked her to open the archive.

Many times over, their proposals, their commands, and the hands they reached out with made her heart tremble.

Every time the door was pushed open, every time someone came in, her expectations rose. Had That Person arrived?

But her hopes were always dashed. These visitors knew nothing of That Person's duty, nor did the mystic tome left to her by Mother indicate any of them was That Person.

Therefore, Beatrice brushed aside their words, their feelings, and the hands they extended, rejecting them all, clinging to Mother's words alone and continuing to gradually shut herself in a cage of loneliness.

Would the key to that cage come from inside, or would it come from outside?

—Not even Beatrice herself knew anymore.

4

As that long, empty time passed, an unwanted change arrived at Beatrice's doorstep.

Even Beatrice, who tried her hardest not to associate with the outside world, had learned a fair bit about the circumstances of the half-demon girl—Puck's contractor—whom Roswaal had brought home with him.

One might call the unexpected reunion with Puck at Roswaal's mansion one of the few events that had made Beatrice's heart leap in those four centuries of service.

Puck was a Great Spirit with origins identical to Beatrice's. However, unlike how she lived according to the will of Echidna the Witch since days long past, he had started a new life long before the birth of the Sanctuary, and she had not seen him since.

However, the joy Beatrice felt at being reunited with the spirit who she adored like an older brother—was swiftly crushed.

Seeing Puck spend blissful days with the half-demon girl he'd contracted with sent cracks running through her heart.

She was jealous. No, it was something more than jealousy—she was envious that he was fulfilling his duty, something she could only imagine in her wildest of dreams.

Therefore, to the greatest extent possible, she did her best to avoid interacting with the half-demon girl who was so precious to Puck. Had she not done so, no doubt someday she would have taken the unease lurking in her heart out on the girl.

They would have clashed, and through no fault of anyone's, she would surely make a mistake she could never undo against the girl her beloved older brother considered to be the most precious in the world.

She appealed to her heart's self-control. Suppressing her emotions and keeping her words sealed away was her specialty.

She had done so over and over across four centuries. Her heart did not fear silence or loneliness at that late hour.

In her familiar, tried-and-true fashion, she gave up and chalked it up to the despair she knew so well.

—It was during those days of resignation that an anomaly suddenly intruded upon her domain.

At first, she assumed he was just another foolish human and held no interest in him whatsoever. He was a traveler the half-demon girl had brought back from the royal capital, and a stupid one at that.

By some twist of fate, he ended up staying at the mansion, and on top of that, he had an affinity for Dark magic, making him highly compatible with Beatrice's Passage; as a result, he forced his way into the archive of forbidden books time and time again.

He was an odd boy.

It was plain as day to anyone with eyes that the boy was completely smitten with the half-demon girl. It was just as obvious that this was no scheme or dark ambition; the only motive was his shockingly simplistic love for her and nothing more.

On a whim, she had saved the boy from a curse and offered him words of advice.

She regretted this when afterward, he settled down at the mansion indefinitely, insisting on becoming even chummier.

But what she found surprising was that he knew of Beatrice's talents yet did not desire them in any way. Indeed, when he came to ask about curses, it was Beatrice, and not the archive of forbidden books, he came to consult.

The boy harbored no interest in the knowledge left in her care or Beatrice's power whatsoever.

Up until then, various persons had arrived at the archive of forbidden books, in which Beatrice placed her fleeting hopes—yet Beatrice herself had rejected them, denied them.

In the first place, the boy lacked many of the attributes Beatrice hoped for in the person she awaited.

First, there was a nasty quality to his eyes. His attitude was awful. His upbringing was deficient. His legs were short. He had someone he already cared for with all his being, and he wasn't kind to Beatrice. She couldn't find even one good thing about him.

It genuinely hurt when she tried to understand what the half-demon girl and the younger of the maid sisters saw in him.

He had absolutely no redeeming qualities, so Beatrice wished he would know his place and just accept being alone.

And given his situation, she thought she could at least be a little nicer whenever he poked his head into the archive.

Yet, even though that was how she thought of him at the time —

—in the end, without a single shred of consideration for Beatrice's bewilderment, time coursed, and the world moved.

Beatrice did not know the fine details of what happened outside the mansion after that.

But the half-demon girl was summoned to the capital, and when she returned, the boy, who should have been traveling by her side, was absent. When he next reappeared, the boy had acquired an heirloom that belonged to someone whom she had fond memories of.

Upon seeing the book, Beatrice gained a keen appreciation of how yet another had left her behind in the world, even as she sent the boy and those with him off to the Sanctuary in accordance with Roswaal's plot.

He was going to meet the Witch of Greed, fulfilling the long-cherished desire of his family—such were the words Roswaal left with Beatrice when he visited her in the archive before heading to the Sanctuary.

From those words and the look in Roswaal's eyes, Beatrice surmised he was going to settle things.

Simultaneously, Beatrice settled upon a conclusion of her own.

A conclusion about the promised person supposedly recorded in the book of knowledge that had remained blank for four centuries.

—That Person would never arrive at Beatrice's doorstep.

When the air of death permeated the mansion, Beatrice immediately came to a realization.

Even in the presence of such a thick aura, the book of knowledge had nothing written in it about Beatrice's future. Destiny had abandoned her. And for some reason, she accepted this with ease.

That was probably because Beatrice had finally caught sight of the conclusion that she had long desired.

—That Person would never come. Yet, even so, she had to keep waiting.

In which case, Beatrice had no choice but to wait until someone stopped her from waiting any longer.

If that also meant robbing her of her life, she didn't care who did it.

If it was possible, she would have liked to entrust even a tiny bit of the end of those four centuries to another.

Therefore, that night, when the boy—Subaru Natsuki—raced into the archive of forbidden books, Beatrice vented all her deeply repressed feelings, which were so difficult to put into words.

That instant, for the first time, Beatrice wanted some revenge against the destiny that had not tried to save her heart even once.

If he could be the one to take her and finally end the pact, then that would be—

"I'm getting you out of here, Beatrice—This time, my hand's gonna lead you right out under the big ol' sun, and we'll play around until that dress is totally black from mud."

"

If she put it on her lips, if she spoke the words, her dormant emotions would bubble over and come out onto her face.

Beatrice would lose her obsession with Mother's words, which had bound her for four hundred years, and from that moment forward, she would cling to something new, something she would never let go.

It was with full knowledge of this that Beatrice posed the decisive question—

"Would you…become That Person for Betty?"

"You really are an idiot. There's no way in hell I'd become this stupid person or whatever for you."

5

She had been in danger of doing something she could never take back.

But before she even had a chance to try, the possibility was snatched away.

—She felt like she had reduced herself to a frivolous and very cheap clown.

"…Am I just…tired, I wonder?"

In the first place, she was wrong to even think of taking that boy's hand.

He did not possess the pure heart of someone who would dirty his own hands for the sake of someone else without a second thought.

Just like Beatrice, he possessed a weak heart. He was indecisive and agonized over trivial things; uncertain of himself and hesitant, always ready to pile up one excuse after another instead of facing things head-on.

That was why her death would no doubt come in a different form.

Just like the intruders who had come into the mansion, enshrouded in a dense halo of death.

Or perhaps the flames spreading through the mansion would burn all to ash, like a fiery purgatory.

All she had to do was wait for it—

"Aaand I'm back! Hey, you big moron! You really got me good back there, damn it…"

"—!!"

“Gaaagh?!”

When the boy suddenly appeared in the archive of forbidden books like so many times before, Beatrice blew him away on reflex.

She was seething, and the attack came swifter than she could think. The boy was struck by a shock wave, shooting him out the door through which he had just entered. The door audibly slammed shut.

“I—I am finished speaking with you…and yet, you came again. Just how impudent are you, I wonder?!”

Beatrice couldn’t even understand the sheer gall needed for him to show his face again after what he had said to her last.

As if to clear her mind, Beatrice took several deep breaths, once more waiting for time to—

“Cut it out with the temper tantrums already! If you resort to violence right away, this conversation’ll never—

“You cut it out!!”

“Waaah!”

A two-pronged flow of magical energy hit him in the face, then in the gut.

The boy proceeded to groan in agony as he was hurled out of the room before the door shut again, forcibly ejecting him from the space.

“Is this even remotely funny, I wonder…?”

Murmuring with irritation, Beatrice settled back onto her stool, clutching the blank book of knowledge as she glared at the door, fearful that it might open again.

She was scared that her feelings, which had been shoved aside by arbitrary logic and unthinkable emotions, might be forced to the surface.

No matter how many times you come, I will continue to refuse you. After all, you are not That Person.

You abandoned any right to take Beatrice from here.

That is why Beatrice will stay until she and her unfulfilled promise meet their ends.

—At that moment, that was the only thing Beatrice thought could grant her salvation.

6

Sent flying out of the archive, Subaru wisely broke his fall the

instant he collided with the hallway wall.

“Gah… I’m in one piece!”

Having split off from Petra and Otto, he was hell-bent on trying to persuade Beatrice for the fourth time—and thanks to being smacked so much in a short span, he was becoming quite an expert at blunting the impact of the invisible shock waves.

“This ain’t the time to polish up stupid techniques like that. My instincts are telling me the fire’s getting bad.”

Wiping off his coursing sweat with a sleeve, Subaru crouched, clicking his tongue at the poor visibility.

The fire consuming the mansion had worsened, and hovering black smoke now reached every corner of the main wing. The floor below was already enveloped by the tendrils of flames; if he fell through the floor, he would not be able to avoid being charred to a crisp.

With the fire having spread to both the east and west wings, it was no longer possible to stop it.

The silver linings were that the candidates for Passage had been drastically reduced and that many of the demon beasts had fled due to the inferno, leaving Subaru with no enemies barring his path as he scurried around the mansion. That said, the more of the mansion that was lost to flames, the higher the odds of Subaru burning to death.

It would not be long until the mansion underwent a fiery collapse. He had to get Beatrice out of there before it came to that.

“Besides, what’s gonna happen to her archive of forbidden books if all the doors are burned to a crisp…?”

If, by any chance, all links to the doors were cut, just where would that archive’s door lead? Perhaps it would lead nowhere, and that girl’s world of loneliness would continue on for eternity?

Or perhaps the archive of forbidden books would share the mansion’s fate, consumed by flames and returned to ash?

“As if I’m gonna just stand by and let you end up like that…!”

Taking a deep breath, Subaru ran while staying so low to the ground, he was practically licking the floor. Throwing open the door from which he had been hurled, he put his hand on the next door, opening one after another.

The structural materials burned, and there was something like a bursting sound as the mansion where he spent so many irreplaceable days burned to the ground.

“—Gah, agh!”

When he grasped the doorknob of a yet-unopened door, he suppressed the urge to cry out in pain from his scorched palm. However, in a short span of time, it was a pain he’d grown accustomed to feeling.

The pain sharply stabbed him through his temples as he kicked the door open, racing inside.

“

“Nah, you’re wrong. If you were serious, I’d never have been able to reach this place over and over in such a short time like this. Your rejection is skin-deep.”

“—I, ah…”

Beatrice grew even more confused. She was at a loss, unable to form the words with which to reject him.

Passage was not all-powerful. That was simply fact. However, it came shockingly close.

If Beatrice had genuinely wanted to separate the archive of forbidden books from the outside world, it should have been easy to prevent Subaru from entering.

Did she not—could she not—do so because her heart had strayed?

“

said so, even as a lie, Betty would have probably believed you. Even knowing it was a lie, she would have to believe you."

"Beatrice…"

"But did you not say that was wrong, I wonder? You said it was wrong, and you said it was stupid. Well, I suppose you were right. Yes, Betty is an idiot, a huge idiot who cannot bring herself to forget a verbal promise she made four centuries ago… That's why! No matter what you say, is it not already over, I wonder?!"

As Beatrice shouted her rejection, fierce gales spawned around her, enveloping her like a cage.

The torrent of magical energy made the girl's dress and hair flap in the wind, and a tragic mood filled the archive of forbidden books. After watching this unfold, Subaru drew in his breath, then began walking forward.

His feeble heart was afraid—afraid that the squalls would hurt him. Fighting against that fear, he clenched his burned palms tight and used that pain to focus on just looking straight ahead.

"I…"

"

for dear life. The pages flapping in the wind…were white. They were all blank.

—The book of prophecy revealed nothing and urged her to make a choice all the same.

"—The hell?"

Beatrice closed the book. Simultaneously, there was an unnatural distortion in Subaru's field of view. His vision became hazy, and he fell to his knees, unable to stand. It definitely wasn't anemia or fatigue that brought him down.

The real culprit was the archive of forbidden books itself, which was swaying quite violently. The floor twisted, and the bookshelves, having lost their balance, tumbled one after another. The books lining their shelves were sent flying, blanketing the room in a sea of covers, spines, and paper.

This was the archive of forbidden books that Beatrice had built —if the state of the archive correlated with Beatrice's mental state, then it was clear she was shaken to the point where she could no longer maintain the place.

"Beatrice—!"

As everything around him became progressively more warped, Subaru did his best to stand as he reached a hand out toward Beatrice. The area around her was the only place unaffected by the distortion; even then, the girl sat atop the stool.

If he jumped, he'd reach her. Trusting in this, Subaru turned toward Beatrice and took a leap of faith.

The instant he did, space itself ripped open like a piece of paper, and Subaru's body was only moments away from being swallowed by the tear.

"—Oh, cra…!"

He wouldn't make it. Able to do nothing else, Subaru dove into the gap.

This was not Passage. It was a leap through space that did not involve a door—Subaru had experienced this exact thing once before.

It was when he'd let Emilia die. It was when he'd let Beatrice die.

"

Good-bye.

7

The instant he emerged from his crossing, the smoke he inhaled sent him coughing. The hot wind felt like it was scorching his skin.

"—The entrance?! How courteous. Shit!"

Lifting up his black, grimy face, Subaru realized he was at the entrance of the burning mansion.

Looking farther, he was certain the entirety of the building was already engulfed by flames; the inferno touched not only the main wing, where the fire had started, but also the east and west wings.

It was difficult to find a place inside the mansion that was still in its original shape. Even the door of the entrance from which Subaru had just emerged had its lower half enveloped by flames. That Passage had worked at all was itself a miracle.

He wouldn't be able to leap back into the archive of forbidden books from there—No, it was questionable whether there was a single door leading to the archive remaining in the mansion.

He wasn't inside the burning mansion; he'd been thrown outside. Beatrice had probably intended this to be her reply.

"Good-bye, my ass—How are you gonna act tough, then show me a face like that at the end?!"

Brushing those rising doubts aside, Subaru kicked the burning door in all his fury, rushing into the entryway. He was immediately greeted by a wave of heat incomparable to anything he felt outside, and the agony of his singed windpipe brought tears to his eyes.

Charging into a burning building like someone who didn't know better, trying to save lives and be a hero—that was the kind of dumb stunt that got people killed. But Subaru had no intention of dying.

"And I'm not letting her die, either!"

Subaru raced across the flaming Roswaal Manor in search of anything that might be connected to the archive.

His face, his neck, and his limbs were roasting, and his skin felt pain as if it was being scorched. It hurt to breathe, but not so much that he couldn't run. Subaru shoved everything else out of his mind.

If Subaru had been capable of seeing things more clearly at the time, the sheer horror of the sight might have caused his body to quiver uncontrollably.

For as Subaru ran through the inferno, swearing he would bring the girl with him, he was enveloped by an incredibly dense black miasma, almost like a cloak of shadow that shielded him.

Unaware of this, Subaru broke through a particularly large wall of flame and found the stairs.

The first-floor dining room was where the fire had begun. Entryway included, it was highly probable that every door there had burned up. If there was a door still intact, it would be on a higher floor—probably at the very top.

In such a conflagration, it was naturally unlikely that he could get back up there from the first floor. Even so, without any hesitation, Subaru started climbing the stairs, racing toward the topmost floor.

A moment later—.

“

They were why Subaru could stand then and there—Subaru Natsuki did not doubt his allies.

“Garfiel wouldn’t lose to you. There’s no way you beat him.”

“

Relentlessly chased by the corpse that had lost all humanity, Subaru kept running to the topmost floor. Stumbling onto the blaze-enveloped third floor, he found himself at the corridor that led to the study where he saw off Petra and Otto.

They must have made it out safe and sound. Garfiel and Frederica, too.

And judging from the lack of organization among the demon beasts, Meili must have been routed, too. As for Elsa—

“

Subaru had traversed first.

There was no deeper reason behind the undead sending the demon beast's hind paw flying away. Screaming as the wicked blade drew black blood, the beast cracked its serpentine tail at the undead.

In a feat beyond the limitations of a human body, the corpse evaded the tail attack, retaliating by slicing the tail off at its base. Unleashing the murderous techniques ingrained into its flesh, the undead cut into the demon beast in a one-sided manner.

Subaru, not letting slip the opportunity to turn misfortune into fortune, kicked open one closed door after another on the topmost floor.

The stateroom and the reference room were both busts. The battle between undead and demon beast continued, but all he heard were the screams of the demon beast, clearly losing the lopsided fight.

"Please, Beatrice…!"

Finally arriving at the study, Subaru flung the door open with a prayer in his heart.

However, uncertainty crept in as the only sight before him was a ransacked office.

"This didn't work, either…! Then the last door is…"

The burning floors below were all wiped out. The other wings were burning up even faster than the main one, perhaps because of the collapses there. Was there even a single intact door left inside Roswaal Manor at that point?

"No, not yet! There's still more! There's one door!"

Biting down any thoughts of giving up, Subaru set eyes upon the wide-open entrance to the spiraling stairs leading to the escape tunnel. If he went down the stairs and arrived at the underground passage—there definitely ought to be a door ahead.

Previously, when he'd returned to the mansion during a Witch Cult attack, Subaru had headed deep into the escape tunnel, was bathed in cold through the door, shattered into dust, and died—that door was still there.

Instantly, hesitation arose in the back of Subaru's mind. It was not fear. It was doubt.

His thoughts coalesced. Were his actions being guided? All the other doors in the mansion were misses, leading Subaru to the escape tunnel—was this Beatrice's intent?

Was this all Beatrice's plan so that Subaru might escape outside, so that he might live?

"—! I don't even have the time to think about it!"

Behind him, death throes thundered throughout the mansion as the beast suffered a decisive blow. The demon beast had been unwittingly buying him time, but with that last strike, the cruel undead had surely taken its life.

—He had no other options. Subaru was being herded into the hidden passage.

The smoke was overwhelming the spiraling staircase leading to the basement of the mansion. With zero visibility and the fact that taking a single breath would spell death and a one-way trip to a world of nightmares, Subaru hardened his resolve, held his breath, and ran down.

What had once been extreme cold was now instead scalding hot. Subaru advanced deeper, deeper into the dark underground passage.

Finally, ahead of the smoke-infested darkness, he stopped, for he had found the door he sought.

"This is…"

It was the final possibility—Subaru drew in his breath as that realization sank in.

Subaru had never gone beyond the door in the hidden passage. He knew this escape tunnel ultimately led to a cabin off in the forest. But not once had he actually gone that far. Everything beyond that door was personally unknown to Subaru.

Accordingly, to Subaru, this door was the final candidate. It was his last chance to get through to Beatrice.

If he really had been guided there by Beatrice's will, it was a poor wager.

Fearful of just that, Subaru reached his hand toward the door's handle—

"Daaah! This door again…!!"

His palm felt like it was on fire. His fingers hadn't even touched it. Subaru drew his hand back and glared at the door. The door's reaction seemed to mock Subaru for his fear of what might result—and then suddenly, he came to a realization.

"The doorknob's hot…?"

—Even if hot air had crept in, there was no sign of fire in the underground escape tunnel.

The hovering smoke and heat had coursed in through gaps in the stone comprising the spiral stairs. There was nothing burning in the tunnel. How could this interior door possess so much heat?

"…Beatrice. If you can hear this, listen to me."

Keeping his hand away from the door, Subaru slightly craned his neck upward and spoke those words.

He believed his voice would reach the girl who was nowhere to be seen.

"You led me this far, didn't you? To be blunt, if you were plotting to bring me to the escape tunnel by making it the only option, blatantly leading me here by the nose, then your plan's a complete failure."

Even if he'd had to slip past the mansion fire, Elsa, and the demon beast along the way, she'd no doubt hatched a plan and put it into action. If this door was a bust, too, leaving him no choice but to go to the cabin, her goal would have been achieved.

"But it doesn't look like things are gonna go that smoothly… Even if this door's a bust, I'm not running like you want. This isn't talking tough or some bluff saying I don't wanna run, okay? Sure, nine-tenths of how I feel lines up with all that…but this is a serious, legit issue."

Subaru continued earnestly trying to convince her, not even knowing if the other party could hear him.

Subaru tapped the door barring his path with his foot as he let out a sigh.

"If I open this door, I'll probably die. I don't know if you or anyone else gets it, but that's exactly what'll happen…and I know because I have the power of science."

Though it had failed him miserably with the misfire in the dining hall, the latent modern knowledge sleeping within Subaru was now ringing an alarm.

The door in front of Subaru's eyes that moment was a door that had to be left untouched. This was a frequent danger at the sites of fires.

In front of him was a door of hellish flame. Behind him was the undead Elsa—this was a gambling parlor, and his life was on the line.

"Beatrice. I'm…going to open this door—I'll leave it up to you to interpret my words."

Was his voice really reaching Beatrice?

And if it did reach her, would Beatrice believe Subaru's words?

Somehow, the idea that his life would be determined by her choice put Subaru's heart at ease.

…Of course it did.

"—Beatrice. I…trust you."

As he spoke, Subaru felt the pain of his palm being burned as he flung the door open.

And then—

8

—The undead arrived underground, not by taking the spiral stairs but by rolling down them.

Black smoke invaded its lungs. The heat singed its skin. The flames threatened its life. The undead charged forward, heedless of all the danger.

It gripped a wicked blade in its right hand. In its left was the heart of the demon beast it had killed. One would think no sight so ghastly could exist in the world. Regardless, the undead felt an inexhaustible sense of duty as it pursued its prey.

Its flesh had been destroyed to the point that it should have been unresponsive. Its life had been whittled away beyond its ability to regenerate. There was no longer a person's will residing within the crawling corpse.

That it moved even so was because the undead's reason for existence waited ahead.

Finally, wordlessly, cruelly, the corpse arrived at the innermost part of the passage.

"

the corridor, causing a puff of heat.

Immediately afterward, oxygen flowed into the tunnel, where incomplete combustion had occurred. The moment the heat and the oxygen-rich air came into contact, everything burst into incandescent flames. Though the earlier attempt to cause a dust explosion had failed, the fire had just produced the explosive phenomenon known as a *back draft*. This was not something that an undead bereft of all reason could ever have surmised.

“

"…You are an idiot."

"That's the first thing out of your mouth?"

"Is it not true, I wonder? Even though Betty went through all that trouble so you might escape, you threw it away… Are there any doors left anywhere in the mansion, I wonder? This is a dead end."

As a matter of fact, she was right. There wasn't a single door left in the mansion for Passage to connect to.

The flames that had reached the archive of forbidden books were gradually increasing in force, spreading to the Witch's knowledge that Beatrice had continued protecting across four centuries, turning that promise to ash.

Her precious obligation was on fire. It was easily flammable, so it would no doubt burn down, and soon.

"At this rate, you and I are both goners."

"…Yes, is this the end, I wonder? Betty wishes for little now. Everything she was to hand to That Person will soon burn away. Is everything now not completely contrary to her promise to Mother, I wonder?"

"Oh yeah? Then hear me out to the end, okay?"

She'd failed to keep her word. Subaru had failed to persuade her. Beatrice looked toward him with empty eyes.

She spoke no words of affirmation or denial. But at the very least, she seemed to be lending him her ears. Even in a situation like that, it just wasn't in her nature to deny someone else to the bitter end.

He took a breath. There were words he had been unable to speak when they'd last parted.

—This time, he'd tell her everything he wanted to say.

"Beatrice—please save me."

"…Huh?"

Subaru stated those words boldly with his head held high.

Hearing him say such a thing with his face all covered in soot, Beatrice could only stare at him in shock.

She'd no doubt imagined countless things that he might possibly say.

With both of them facing an unavoidable end, Beatrice had probably run numerous mental simulations about what words Subaru might say to her, no doubt intending to dismiss each and every one.

—I want to save you. I won't let you be alone. I need you.

Those were the sorts of cool, manly words from That Person that she expected to be greeted with.

But if that meant trying to convey false feelings, Subaru just couldn't do it.

"I considered saying cooler-sounding stuff about whisking you away from this loneliness, mind you… I didn't think any of them would work. I figured I'd better come right out and say…what I think of you and what I really wanted to tell you."

Beatrice was speechless as Subaru poured out his genuine feelings.

He figured it was pretty mean to put the ball entirely in Beatrice's court, though.

"Really, you don't need any of my strength. Not for saving you or anything else. You're strong, you're smart, you're cute… You should be able to do anything if you put your mind to it."

"

even wider.

His hand was inflamed from burns and was a hideous sight. Even so, it was still in better shape than his left, which had sustained so much damage that the very sight of it was unbearable.

He offered the one hand he had that could be cleaned up to pass as something suitable for taking a pretty girl's hand.

"Beatrice. Save me, please."

"

“I’ll be there tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the day after that. Even if I can’t promise to be around in four hundred years, I can still spend each and every day I have together with you. Even if we can’t be together for eternity, I can treasure you tomorrow and right now.”

“

“Even though you’ll leave me behind…”

“Let’s be together. Let’s live life together. Let’s do this together. Let’s build up so many memories that we can blow away all that fear, puff our chests out, then laugh and say, *We sure had fun*. We’ll do so much that you can make up for the four lonely centuries you spent living here.”

“Even…if we did all that! Someday, I’ll be alone again!”

He saw himself reflected in the girl’s trembling eyes.

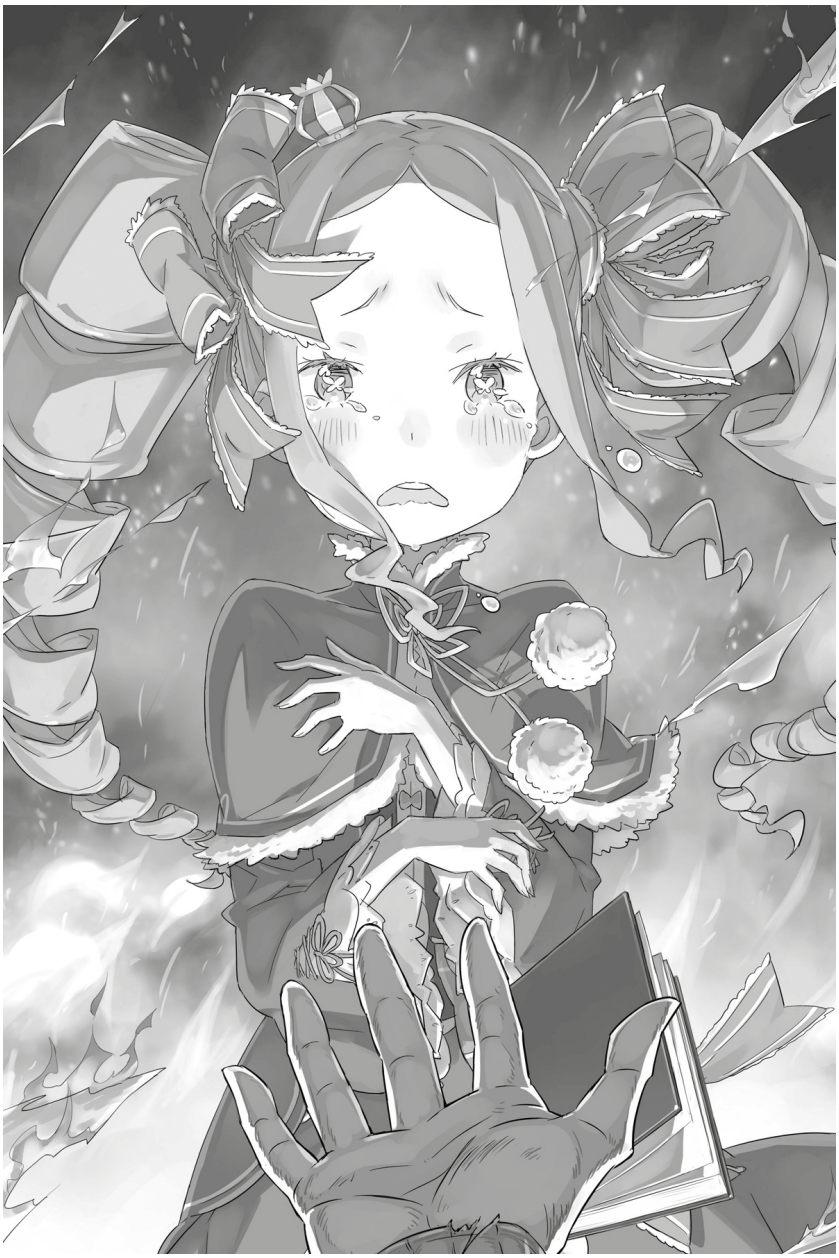
He looked shabby, unsightly, a far cry from the prince on a white horse she’d spent too many years waiting for.

The only one who stood there was the same old Subaru Natsuki.

“To someone like you who’ll live forever, maybe the time you’ll spend with me will be one brief moment. If that’s how it’s gonna be, then I’ll carve my moment right into your soul.”

“

But just before that happened, there was a sound.
—The sound of a single tome falling to the archive's floor.



10

Otto and Petra gazed wordlessly as Roswaal Manor burned to the ground.

“

that he noticed.

"…That's…"

It was from the topmost floor of the main wing of the burning mansion. With incredible force, fire burst out of the office that Otto's group had used as an escape route. The windows cracked, and the outpouring flames engulfed the mansion's topmost floor. Roswaal Manor finally reached its limit, succumbed to the flames, and collapsed.

"Ah…"

The sight brought a tiny sound out of Petra's throat.

Next to spread across her eyes would likely be despair. As an adult, Otto tried to wipe that sadness away.

"Mr. Otto! Look!"

"Gah?!"

Otto had a meek look on his face when Petra slapped the side of it with her little palm.

The blow caught Otto by surprise and brought stars to his eyes. But when he saw the delighted expression on Petra's face as she pointed at the mansion, he immediately understood, hastily shaking his shock away.

Just like Petra, the people of Earlham Village were raising voices of delight.

"Ha…ha-ha…"

—From Roswaal Manor, aflame and collapsing, a single ray of white light stretched up toward the sky.

The light, which was like a shooting star, changed its angle high in the sky, glimmering as it arced and flew far off to the east, as if to signal its destination.

Otto knew what lay in that direction.

When Petra said, "There! Just now!" with a happy look on her face, his expression had already relaxed.

"The rest is up to you—all this has really worn me out."

11

Simultaneously, just as Otto let his shoulders fall with relief, Garfiel, half-naked and wearing nothing but a tattered cloth around his hips, looked up at the same light and clacked his fangs.

"Ha! Ya sure pulled it off, General! That's my general! *Hoshin kept his promises even if it killed him!*"

Garfiel, who had escaped the burning mansion and broken through the perimeter of demon beasts, laughed himself silly.

He was covered in soot and burn wounds and injuries all over, but his face was full of smiles.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha… Owww?!”

“Do not get worked up while you’re so badly hurt! They will scar!”

As Garfiel laughed, a fist grandly struck the back of his skull. When Garfiel clutched his head and looked back, Frederica stood there with anger on her face.

“A-aren’t ya happy that the general and she are safe and sound?”

“Of course I am… We were right to leave it to Master Subaru. If Lady Beatrice has been saved, then I can rest easier as well.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, Frederica gently patted her own chest. Seeing his elder sister’s reaction made Garfiel crack a smile. “Gotta say, though,” he said as a preamble. “Even if ya talk tough, it’s hard to look tough when you’re all embarrassed while wearin’ a single sheet of cloth.”

“—! It cannot be helped! There was no time to strip my clothes off before transforming!”

Red-faced, Frederica was indignant as she stood there naked save for the curtain wrapped around her.

As he endured his sister’s anger, Garfiel glanced at the girl sleeping under the shade of a nearby tree—Meili—and narrowed his eyes.

At the height of that ferocious battle, Elsa had gone to save Meili when she was in danger of being crushed by falling debris, letting her favorable chance to win against Garfiel slip away. Had she not done so, the victor and the loser might have been reversed.

In the end, Frederica had transformed and pulled Meili out of harm’s way, and with all obstacles removed from the battlefield, Garfiel had settled things with Elsa—and thus, he had supposedly won.

And yet, the feeling that he hadn’t really won refused to go away. Was it just that he was still immature?

Or was it a lingering symptom of having killed for the first time, one that would not allow him the comfort of immersing himself in victory?

Either way—

“The echoes of victory and the feel of killing—I can leave that all for later. The rest is happenin’ in a place where my hands can’t reach no matter how hard I try… Countin’ on ya to take care of it, General.”

Thrusting his fist forward, Garfiel glared, baring his fangs toward the trail of light heading toward the eastern sky.

Gazing in the same direction, Frederica folded her hands against her chest as if making a prayer.

“’Cause once everything’s said and done, there’s still that bastard we both needa smack real good!”

12

—She’d been caught.

She’d understood, yet she’d been ensnared all the same.

She’d known from the start. If she took that hand, if she clung to its warmth, she would never be able to return to those lonely nights again.

Even though she’d rebuked herself, saying living by relying on warmth that would someday vanish was foolishness, even madness…

That voice had called her.

Those eyes had gazed upon her.

That hand needed her.

She should have known. There was no way that she could reject them.

—Subaru.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

—Subaru. Subaru.

“That’s right. That’s my name.”

—Subaru, Subaru, Subaru.

—Subaru!!

“You finally said my name, huh?”

13

The snowfall had become a full-blown blizzard.

The world was dotted with enough snow to blanket one’s field of vision. It was a hell of extreme cold that could freeze one’s breath the instant it touched the outside air.

Though exposed to such ferocious elements, powerful will rested in the girl’s violet eyes as her silver hair flapped in the wind.

“I absolutely, absolutely…won’t lose, not to anyone or anything!”

With faint light entwined around both her hands, the silver-haired girl raised them to employ and release the vast amount of mana within her.

The freezing magic, amplified amid that fiercely blowing snow, began to glow, and that pale radiance became countless swords of light that flew across the world, slicing apart each and every one of the white demon beasts atop the snowy plain.

—There was a disturbing clacking of their short fangs biting against one another in unison.

This was the most unsalvageable thing in the world, the most difficult to coexist with, the great calamity that overshadowed all others since times of yore.

Before these beings, the embodiment of appetite, known as Gluttony incarnate, the girl stood, not backing away a single step.

However, her breathing was ragged; she had lost control over a portion of her mana, which was so vast that she had yet to master it; and part of her body had begun to be covered in white crystals.

At that rate, it would not be long before she was turned into a statue of ice by her very own magical energy.

—Even so, she did not retreat. She could not.

“This is for Mother, for Geuse, and for everyone in the present… Besides, as long as I don’t forget the words he wrote, I’ll never give up.”

Therefore, even if her body was enveloped in ice, the one thing she absolutely would not do was regret.

As the demon beasts tightened their encirclement, they

gradually closed in on the girl and the people depending upon her.

If push came to shove, she was ready to put her life on the line. She was ready.

"—You don't need to overdo it, Emilia-tan. Everything's gonna be all right."

There was a light sound. The girl realized someone had landed right next to her from somewhere far above.

She looked beside her. The raging blizzard was in the way, so she couldn't make out their face.

But she knew exactly who it was.

His voice, his demeanor, and more than that—there was no way he wouldn't come when she most wanted him at her side.

"You can stand back and leave the rest to me—we've got beginner's luck on our side."

"I'm sorry. I don't really get what you're trying to say."

She sensed he was making a wry smile as he stepped ahead. And tagging along was a second, smaller figure.

And then she heard two voices.

Voices that leaped, as if they had been waiting eagerly for this moment for a very, very long time—

"I do not have any idea if this will work."

"Yeah, we'll manage somehow—you and me!!"

—So began the pair's first battle, one of the many, many times Beatrice the spirit and her contractor, Subaru Natsuki, would fight hand in hand.

CHAPTER 8

FACES FASHIONED FROM SNOW

1

In the snow-marred Sanctuary, their fields of vision were filled by the great horde of demon beasts that were Gluttony incarnate.

But his trust in the lovely girl at his back and the warmth he felt in his palm were definitely the real deal.

—That was why Subaru Natsuki stood there without the slightest hesitation or doubt.

"You sure stomped the heck out of 'em, Emilia-tan…!"

Subaru's face was buffeted by the thunderous blizzard as he praised Emilia's valiant fighting.

The falling snow had instantly turned the Sanctuary into the front line of the Great Rabbit's attack. But on previous attempts, by the time that situation arose, the destruction of the Sanctuary was halfway written in stone. This time, he'd averted failure because Emilia had fought valiantly against the demon beasts without retreating a single step.

"—You evacuating everyone to the tomb means you cleared the Trials, right?"

Emilia was taking on the demon-beast horde while shielding Echidna's tomb at her back. At the tomb's entrance, he could see people from the Sanctuary and from Earlham Village watching the state of the battle hand in hand. Ryuzu, who was standing at the congregation's head, told him that this union between the two groups was the result of something that went beyond a simple weighing of pros and cons.

And the one who'd worked hardest to bring that situation about wasn't Emilia or Ryuzu.

“—Ram.”

There was no reply to his call. Her eyelids were closed, and her body was limp, bereft of strength.

Ram had remained in the Sanctuary, vowing to fulfill her greatest wish. Now she was continuing to sleep in the arms of Roswaal, who was sitting on the steps of the tomb in a daze, his expression lost and empty.

Just what had happened between Ram and Roswaal? At present, Subaru had no way of knowing.

“Subaru, for now, could you focus over here, I wonder?”

Subaru was sinking into thought when he felt a tug from the little hand connected to his own. Hearing that familiar voice address him in unfamiliar fashion, Subaru replied with a spontaneous “uhyah!”

“…Why are you giving such a bizarre reply?”

“Er, having you call me by my first name is so fresh and vivid that I have to hold back my joy.”

“Is that all…? Could you indulge in such deep sentiments later, I wonder? …S-Subaru.”

“Beako, you are so cute.”

When Subaru voiced his honest opinion, Beatrice went red-faced, shaking their joined hands around with considerable force. Smiling at her adorable reaction, Subaru gathered himself and let out a breath.

“So, Beatrice. The opponent’s the Great Rabbit. You ready for this?”

“This is the worst situation possible. We have only just formed our pact, the opponent is one of the three great demon beasts, and we are unprepared. My contractor is an amateur, and it has been four centuries since Betty has been in a real fight.”

“And?”

“One might call this an appropriate handicap.”

Beatrice smiled impetuously as the clacking fangs pressed upon them all at once. Stepping forward as if to greet them, Subaru gave a thumbs-up to Emilia as she stood behind them.

“Me and Beatrice’ll send that horde packing. Emilia-tan, take down any that slip by us, ’kay?!”

“—Understood—leave it to me! So the rest is up to you.”

“Yep, we got this.”

The rule was to assign the right person to the right job. It also

reminded him about the saying that the happiest wives were the ones whose husbands were well and often away from home.

Emilia exhaled deeply behind him as mana surged all about, forming an icy, defensive line. Standing in front of the zone of freezing cold, Subaru stood face-to-face against the demon beasts filling his vision.

In contrast to its adorable appearance, the Great Rabbit was ferocious, its very existence odious. Twice, he had lost his life to those fangs. His fear of slipping away as he was devoured was difficult to forget. But—

"Are you scared, I wonder?"

—as Subaru held his breath, Beatrice posed the question with a composed expression. Seeing her eyes and the profile of her face told him more than mere words—they told Subaru exactly who was with him then and there.

"Nah. I'm not scared."

"Oh?"

"I have Emilia behind me and you beside me—gotta say, best feeling ever."

"As it should be."

Beatrice smiled wryly. Meeting her adorable, smiling face, Subaru donned a wicked smile of his own.

The Great Rabbit Horde raised a disturbing howl, leaping all at once toward the pair, who wore bold, fearless smiles.

Faced with that attack—no, that act of feeding—Beatrice and Subaru raised their joined hands, her left, his right.

"First, how about a minor test, I wonder? —*El Minya*."

The moment the chant was complete, a vortex formed in midair, summoning purple-colored crystals all around the pair.

The gleaming crystals, which were shaped like icicles, resembled the purple arrows Beatrice had used on a previous go-around to skewer Elsa; it was a spell she'd called her specialty. Yet, the sheer number of arrows loading the sky was incomparable to what he had seen before.

Targeting took but an instant. Locking on to the heads of every demon beast that made up the Great Rabbit Horde, the purple arrows shot forward at the same time.

Each missile found a skull, slaying every one of the demon beasts. Their dead bodies turned into purple crystals, like the arrows that had felled them, then shattered, unable to withstand the

raging snow. The world of white was filled with glimmering purple fragments.

With a single blow at the outset of the battle, the Great Rabbit vanguard was nearly annihilated. Of course, it was difficult to call this a painful blow to a demon beast that could infinitely propagate, but the spectacular feat left Subaru amazed.

"Th-that's incredible—!"

"R-really? This is nothing at all. For Betty, this is but a piece of cake, I suppose."

"Oh, come on, be real…what's this magic that has so much power?! What element is that?!"

"The Dark element, of course. Also, is this even a fraction of its full potential, I wonder?"

Seeing Subaru's animated reaction made Beatrice proudly puff out her chest.

She took pride in the magic Mother had taught her, the magic she had worked so hard to master.

"I shall demonstrate the mastery of the Dark element and show you that the power of Dark magic is the greatest this world has to offer."

"What…should I do?"

"Would you hold Betty's hand and not leave her alone, I wonder?"

Beatrice spoke such endearing words as she strengthened her grip on Subaru's hand. Squeezing her palm back, Subaru glared at the menace before them, as if to tell Beatrice it was time to let loose.

Devouring the fragments of their comrades' corpses, the Great Rabbit host prepared to advance as a ravaging horde once more. But before they could start…

"Subaru, this is a good lesson for a spirit mage—rather than use the spirit mage's own mana, as is typical, shall I use magic to directly manipulate the mana in the air, I wonder?"

"I see—in that case, even with my busted Gate… Okay, I'll leave Shamak to you!"

"Do not expect anything as paltry as Subaru's useless Shamak! Can Subaru, who's equally useless and nothing more than dead weight, do anything for Betty save showering her with praise?"

Beatrice's imperious pop quiz left Subaru falling into thought a little. But as he pondered, the clacking of the Great Rabbit's fangs

pressed near, and with nothing but his direct experiences with impending death coming to mind, Subaru shouted.

"I don't know the answer!"

"Then I should teach you, I suppose. Focus on Betty's hand and imagine it. Imagine the weaving of mana, the power to shape it into the form of an arrow, the power to materialize and shatter our foe —imagine a mighty attack."

"I imagined it!"

"Then is there anything left but to chant, I wonder?!"

Beatrice's voice made Subaru snap open his closed eyes and thrust his left hand forward. Simultaneously, Beatrice moved her right hand forward, aiming it toward the Great Rabbit Horde—power surged forth.

"—El Minya!!"

The two chanted as one. Purple-streaked power manifested in the sky, pouring earthward upon the demon beasts.

The explosive, destructive force made the stage known as the Sanctuary glimmer with purple fragments—the ferocious battle had begun.

2

To Subaru, using magic had always been an act tantamount to whittling his own soul away.

Just as Roswaal and Puck had guaranteed from the beginning, Subaru had no talent for magic. In the end, he'd abused Shamak, the one spell he'd learned, finally wrecking his own Gate, closing the path of the magician to him forever.

Therefore, he'd never thought another opportunity to use magic would visit him ever again, but—

"*Minya! Minya!* This is tough to say, damn it! *Minyaaa!*"

Relying on the vast surge of mana, Subaru did the seemingly impossible, rapidly casting Great Magic again and again.

The purple arrows thus spawned opened one hole in the demon-beast force after another, turning the ferocious Great Rabbit into purple fragments. Glancing at these, Beatrice tugged on Subaru's arm, and with a light step, they sailed into the air.

Strangely, Subaru was not surprised by the feeling of weightlessness brought by ignoring gravity. Stepping upon the sky, Beatrice twirled and wove to evade the fangs in what truly looked

like the dance of a fairy.

“We’re crossing.”

“Got it.”

An instant after she made her announcement, space distorted, and the pair vanished from the sky. It was a short-range warp that differed from Passage. The jump through space threw off the Great Rabbit; the horde did not notice when Subaru and Beatrice emerged behind it.

“Will you take care of the left, I wonder?”

“Then I’ll leave the right to you.”

Giving form to the magic in his mind, Subaru influenced the world through Beatrice.

It felt like he was profiting with someone else’s hard-earned money, robbing the moment of any enjoyment. Subaru followed the power of his imagination, loading the sky up with purple arrows large and small, using them as deadly weapons to bore holes into the demon beasts.

In his mind, he was loading a gun. He felt like he was creating bullets of mana and then pulling the trigger.

But his imagination had an undeniable effect in reality, shooting down the onrushing demon beasts like he was hunting ducks.

The Great Rabbit Horde on the opposite side was being similarly attacked by the destruction wrought by Beatrice. Cracks came forth from thin air, and it was like hundreds of the creatures were being shut inside the surface of a painting. The picture fragmented, seemingly being broken apart, and the demon beasts inside were all returned to ash.

All Subaru could do was twirl his tongue at the breadth of her magical skill.

Unlike Subaru, an idiot who’d learned only one spell, Beatrice could employ multiple varieties in multiple fashions. It was as if she was going out of her way to make plain to Subaru all the cards she held in her hands.

“That said, blasting ’em without a plan won’t solve anything. Beako, you have a plan, right?”

“Of course I have a plan. Is the first stage of it not already complete, I wonder?”

The Great Rabbit increased its numbers every bit as much as they dwindled. As Subaru sensed this special nature put them at a

stalemate, Beatrice made a reply that sounded quite dependable indeed.

He gave her a look that demanded an explanation, and in response, Beatrice sniffed proudly.

"All that is necessary is to assemble the demon beasts in one place. Have we truly gathered the entire horde in this forest…in this Sanctuary here in front of the tomb, I wonder?"

"Well, I suppose we have. But they infinitely reproduce. It's not like we've taken a roll call."

"—*Infinite*, you say, but that does not mean there is no limit."

The sentence made Subaru narrow his brows; then comprehension struck him like a bolt of lightning. He looked at the horde of demon beasts. As usual, the white fur balls were visible for as far as the eye could see—yet, if they really were reproducing infinitely…

"It doesn't add up… If they could really do that, they'd cover the whole planet and even space…!"

"Most likely, even if they can propagate endlessly, there should be an upper limit. Therefore, they will not increase beyond that fixed number. In that case…"

"Get them to that upper limit and wipe them all out in one go!"

Subaru's eyes glimmered as he saw the strategy laid out before him.

"But the problem is in the second stage—how should we go about eliminating them, I wonder?"

Beatrice's concern was just how to simultaneously strike down the Great Rabbit, which numbered in the tens of thousands.

If you had force on par with some kind of missile, you could just burn them away along with the Sanctuary itself, but if even one of them survived, they would recover in full. The risk was incalculable.

It was difficult to wipe them off the map with simple brute force. The other way would be to—

"Your face says you have thought of something."

"Like usual, I settled on a plan that depends on you. Sounds good?"

Beatrice used magic even in the midst of their conversation to attract the demon beasts' attention toward the pair. Subaru drew his lips close to her refined ear and whispered his idea into it. Beatrice nodded after a few moments of thought.

“Betty did think of something rather similar, I suppose. But even with Betty and Subaru, these numbers are…”

“Hey, hey, you’ve got something wrong here, Beako. You don’t get it at all.”

“—?”

“In a situation like this, it’s not like we have to settle everything with you alone or just the two of us, you know?”

Listening to Subaru’s reply, Beatrice let an “ah” slip out as her eyes shot open. Then the girl heaved a cloudy sigh as she turned toward Subaru with the faintest of pouts.

“Truly, Subaru…no one in the world is better at relying upon others than you.”

“I promise in the future I’ll become a vibrant, high-end contractor so you’ll never get frustrated again.”

“Did you really think that would sound even slightly convincing when it comes from the mouth of a serial promise-breaker, I wonder?”

She said that with a smile, and Subaru couldn’t deny any of it. Seeing his reaction, Beatrice pressed her palm against his chest, nodding deeply with a gaze filled with trust.

“Even Betty requires time to prepare for this. Would you serve as a decoy during that time, I wonder?”

“Relax. There ain’t a single person in Lugunica who can beat me when it comes to distracting powerful enemies.”

Beatrice closed her eyes and sank into contemplation. This was the first step toward putting Subaru’s operation into motion. Picking up her tiny body, Subaru powerfully kicked off from the snow.

Homing in on Subaru and Beatrice as they raced across the snowy plain, the approaching demon beasts clacked their fangs and moved in for the kill. Too slow. Considering the sticky situations he’d found himself in over the last couple of days, the Great Rabbit swarm he faced now just seemed tame in comparison.

“Outta my way, you little gnats! I don’t have time to deal with you right now!”

Evading their fangs, leaping over their heads, Subaru trod upon purple fragments as he raced through their pack.

Chanting and loosing purple missiles to force open a path, Subaru continued carrying Beatrice as he rushed right through the battle-worn clearing toward Emilia, who stood in front of the tomb.

“Eh, Subaru?!”

Subaru’s sprint made Emilia’s eyes bulge wide. Sliding to a stop right beside her, Subaru put Beatrice, still deep in contemplation, down on top of the snow, patting her head as he spoke.

“Sorry, Emilia-tan! It’s too tough for Beako and me to handle this on our own!”

“Th-that’s fine. But what should we do? Maybe I can…”

“Nah, I’ve thought up a way to beat them, so there’s no need for you to wear yourself out trying to land a knockout blow! Actually, please don’t even try. It’d make coming this far meaningless.”

It surprised Emilia that he had seen right through her and gleaned she was considering self-destructive techniques to win the day. He wasn’t going to let her do it. He absolutely wouldn’t let her, now or later. He fully intended to make sure she would never have to do it ever again.

He didn’t want any part of her thinking it didn’t matter how badly she was hurt as long as she could save everyone else.

“Everyone safe, everyone saved. That’s obviously the best outcome.”

“Subaru…”

“Emilia-tan, I want you to be just a little more selfish from here on. If you can’t, I’ll think a little harder, but if you can, I just want you to do your best. Let’s win this for everyone’s sake.”

“

Subaru could feel it.

Emilia was standing in front of the tomb. Subaru was holding Beatrice within his arms. Believing in Subaru's plan, both of them were fully devoted to controlling their respective mana to bring it to fruition.

And it fell to Subaru to buy the time they both needed until they were prepared.

"C'mon, c'mon! I'm your opponent, same as usual! Follow meee!"

Smiling and waving, Subaru mercilessly pounded the horde with a vicious blow.

The explosive bombardment created a wild dance of purple light, which sent the demon beasts flying and made them wriggle as one. The horde moved like one gigantic body and began chasing Subaru in a mad dash around the Sanctuary.

This was the beginning of the operation. At the very least, his worry that they might hit the tomb first was gone.

"It's not as if you can ignore the smell of mana and my stench, either!"

It was the Great Rabbit's nature to be attracted by mana. It was Subaru's nature to have demon beasts want to devour him. With Beatrice, her eyes still closed, resting in his arms, Subaru Natsuki was a veritable, mouthwatering feast on the hoof as far as the Great Rabbit was concerned.

He heard the clacking of fangs. Subaru heard the deadly footsteps chasing them from behind.

"—! For one of the three great demon beasts, you're so slow! You half-wits, do you actually want me to make you extinct like ol' Whaley?"

Biting fear back with his molars, Subaru hurled the unnecessary insults he kept in the far corners of his mind. If he didn't flap his gums to maintain his calm, he'd never be able to conceal that he was trembling to the core.

He couldn't look that pathetic to the girl behind him, nor to the girl in his arms.

"Subaru—!"

As Subaru put on his own performance, a voice like a silver bell reached his ears through the gale-like snow. When he looked in the snow-filled reaches of his vision, Emilia was thrusting a fist toward the heavens—it was the signal that her preparations were complete.

Receiving this, Subaru put more strength into his legs, with which he kicked at the snow—Emilia was ready, but until Subaru's end was ready—*a little more, just a little farther, just a pinch, go, go, go!*

Without even time to let out his breath, Subaru laid a marker on the snowy plain at his own feet. With this, his do-or-die escape from the Great Rabbit, which was hot on his tail, had finally neared its end.

With that purple-arrow marker thrust into the snowy plain, everything had come together—so he shouted:

"Now, Emilia! Trace the lines—!!"

Plowing through the snow as he came to a halt, Subaru relied on magic for his last stand, commanding the purple arrow, "Let there be light!" The very next instant, countless purple arrows that had been shot into the clearing began to glow, forming a glittering cage.

A horde of tens of thousands of wriggling white demon beasts had been penned up inside that square cage—

"That's Subaru for you! *Really* good job!"

Praising the splendid outcome, Emilia let up a voice of joy that she'd normally never ever make. Then as her eyes glimmered with equally rare aggression, she trained a graceful finger toward the demon beasts within the cage.

—And then she unleashed all the mana she had been forming while Subaru had bought her time.

"Cocytus!"

Applying that incantation, unfamiliar to his tongue, Subaru activated the vast amount of surging mana, transmitting power to the purple crystals, which were arrayed in a square around the clearing, one after another. The lines connected.

With a roar, the ground, the snowy plain itself, floated skyward.

"Amazing…"

Seeing this unfold left Subaru dumbstruck. The spectacle was so overwhelming, it left him speechless.

Emilia carefully supplied magic energy all along the sides of the cage of purple arrows in the clearing, shutting the Great Rabbit inside a snowy cage and lifting them into the sky. Of course, had they been normal demon beasts, they would surely have noticed the abnormality and escaped from the cage—but the Great Rabbit possessed no such decision-making capacity.

They were incarnations of hunger, felt inexhaustible urges of Gluttony, and were children gifted with Daphne the Witch's empty stomach—

"That's why now you're all *one step from a Guiltylowe* and stuff!"

"—With this, there's nowhere left for you to run!"

As Subaru raised a middle finger and levied his insult, Emilia put on the finishing touches.

Emilia used magic energy to weave together an icy lid she simultaneously slammed down onto the patch of snowy ground that had floated into the sky, completing the cage and trapping the massive number of demon beasts.

Even if the Great Rabbit had a will of its own, there was no escape now that the icy prison was fully formed.

From the snow-stripped clearing beneath the prison, he looked around. Stragglers, zero. Wriggling figures, zero.

The whole Great Rabbit Horde had been in one place, enclosed within a square perimeter about twenty yards per side. With this, the conditions had been met.

"Now, the final blow if you please, Great Spirit Beatrice—"

Rocking the girl within his arms, Subaru announced it was time to follow the appetizer with the main course.

Answering his call, the girl gently opened her eyes that had remained quietly closed up to this point. Then, when she set her gaze upon the spectacle before them, she cracked a smile.

She was not surprised whatsoever. She was merely following up on the result she was sure he would deliver—

"—*Al Shamak*."

A moment after the incantation, the ultimate manifestation of the Dark element dyed the world black.

4

—For an instant, the Great Rabbit was whipped around by a feeling of weightlessness before all its weight was slammed against the ground.

That impact freed it from the sense of tightness pressing against the entirety of its form. First, it shook its body, ridding itself of the snow that caked its fur. It made a sound through its nose as it swiveled its head around.

With its eyes, nose, ears, and whiskers, it searched for prey and

consumed it. This was its only desire. It surveyed the area with its red eyes, craving the luxuriant aroma of the mana of its prey that made its whiskers tremble.

It felt nothing. Until just a moment before, it should have been surrounded by a feast. The prey was tantalizing, offering soft flesh and sweet blood that might grant it a sense of fulfillment, a momentary respite from its eternal sense of hunger.

Its eyes saw nothing. Its nose smelled nothing. Its ears heard nothing. Its whiskers did not tremble.

Disappointment. Despair. Foul feelings resembling such things instantly overrode its sense of hunger. To keep the loneliness of its mouth and the emptiness of its stomach at bay, it bit into the clump of white closest to it for the moment.

It tore with its mouth, rending the flesh, sipping the blood, and savoring its innards. It violated the clump of meat to its heart's desire, eating it clean, when it realized similar meals were occurring all about.

Its prey had vanished.

Following its instinct for survival, it was in a daze as it chewed on the white clump that had become its meal, swallowing it whole.

This happened over and over again, driven by insatiable hunger, feeding on the next prey, the prey next after that, the prey next after that after that, next after that after that after—

Finally, having at some point devoured everything in the surrounding area, it found itself alone.

Sipping on clumps of blood, licking up fragments of scattered flesh, it left behind neither dirt nor grass as it savored the fresh blood. If in so doing it had run out of things to eat, it was well and truly alone.

On the inside, it continued to be assaulted by a sense of insatiable hunger beyond its capacity for flesh.

It raised a cry. It clacked its fangs. The maddening hunger was torture—No, it was already mad. For all eternity, it was forbidden from sating its inexhaustible hunger and satisfying its limitless cravings; this was the madness of Gluttony.

—Did Mother also harbor such feelings?

For a single instant, reason bloomed in the back of its mind, which was ruled by hunger. However, it was immediately blotted out.

Its body trembled. As a consequence of its madness, it had subconsciously reproduced, creating a being separate from itself.

It ate this spawn without the slightest hesitation. There was not even an anguished cry as it stuffed itself with the flesh. Afterward, it suffered again from renewed hunger. Then, as a consequence of its hunger, it birthed another one of itself into the world.

It ate. It raged. It birthed. It ate. Over and over. It continued these things over and over.

It was alone. It was in a world without any others. There was forest. There was soil. There was air. All that was missing was prey.

It was alone. It continued eating.

It was alone. Finally, it ate the it that was different from itself, causing it to vanish.

It was alone. It was truly alone, yet it ceased to be lonely as its gluttony continued over and over again.

—Its insatiable hunger would never be sated.

5

The living darkness swallowed up the cage of ice and snow, compressing it along with the Great Rabbit Horde within. Finally, they vanished without a sound.

This, the creation of an isolated space, was the effect of Al Shamak—the greatest of the Shamak line of spells. Enveloped by the magic, the Great Rabbit Horde had been blasted into what was essentially another dimension.

Regeneration and propagation had lost all meaning, for both were literally sequestered in another world.

“I know the plan was to send them into an isolated space like the archive of forbidden books, but…”

“Are you dissatisfied, I wonder?”

As Subaru’s voice trembled in the face of the overwhelming feat, Beatrice tapered her lips by his side. Putting her hands on her hips with an arrogant posture, she seemed most displeased with Subaru’s attitude.

“It really is incredible…”

In Subaru’s stead, it was Emilia who voiced words of honest praise.

Being far more versed in magic than he, Emilia was doubtless

more surprised than Subaru. Now that she had released her combat posture, the freezing across half her body had gradually relented. The worst-case scenario had been avoided.

Swiveling his head about, Subaru made sure the Great Rabbit, which once blanketed the clearing, was nowhere to be found.

Turning around, he also confirmed the tomb was safe. When he saw the various residents of the Sanctuary and Earlham Village were giving him a thumbs-up, he lifted a hand toward them in return. When he looked closer, he noticed Ryuzu replicas were mixed in among them. *Sharing information about what happened in the Sanctuary is gonna be a pain, huh?* Subaru mused with a wry smile.

And sitting on the steps on the tomb was Roswaal, holding Ram in his arms—Ram's hand was touching Roswaal's cheek. His clownish expression contorted, and even from a distance, Subaru could see the tracks of tears.

"

the girl as he twirled around on the spot.

“You did awesome! That’s my Beako! I love you!”

“W-wait a—! That’s not… W-would you let go, I wonder?! Betty is not…!”

“Good girl, good girl! You’re so, so cute! You’re wonderful, Beako! You’re the best, Beako! Beako forever!”

Grandly singing her praises, Subaru lifted Beatrice way up as he spun all around.

Beatrice’s face was beet red as she dangled from his arms. Emilia watched the worked-up pair with gentle eyes. Behind her, she heard the various villagers clapping their hands together and raising cheers.

And as the contractor continued spinning around with his spirit, expressing joy with the entirety of his body…

“Ah—!”

…his foot slipped, sending the pair tumbling headlong into the snow.

CLOSING CHAPTER

MEETING EACH OTHER HALFWAY

1

"—Okay, it's finished!"

Picking up a pair of twigs, Subaru thrust them into the mass of snow before his eyes and wiped off the sweat on his brow.

It was constructed in a short time with amateur workmanship, but he was quite proud that it had come out fairly well. Even the onlookers admired his handiwork and went "ooh" in praise.

"This really does make me feel like I'm a genius at this stuff. If we're ever short on food money, I can have Emilia-tan make the snow fall, and I'll be a living national treasure as a snow artist."

"Goodness, don't say such ridiculous things… But you *really* did a good job, huh?

Sitting on the stone steps, Emilia let out a white breath as she watched Subaru's handiwork.

Displayed in her violet eyes were Subaru and the horde of snowmen—no, snow-Pucks he had finished. He'd gathered up the snow left in the clearing and had made a dozen snow sculptures. Even to Subaru himself, it was a mystery where he'd mustered the passion to craft Pucks of every emotion and for every occasion.

It was probably something like thanks, given how Subaru had heard of Puck's bravery in his absence.

"I am sure this was not his aim, but I think Barusu is indeed an idiot."

In contrast, Ram, her head propped up on Emilia's lap, gave Subaru's actions a quite harsh assessment.

With her burned maid outfit stripped away, Ram's white garment gave her a very different impression. That was probably

because it somehow felt like she had finally left behind something that had been haunting her. Of course, her poison tongue cut as sharply as ever.

“Hey, I’m the guy who worked hardest during this whole mess. Aren’t you praising me too little?”

“Mm, I guess that’s true. I’m *really* grateful toward Subaru. But while you were gone, I was the one working hard, so I think it’s only natural I would want some praise for it.”

“Emilia-tan’s suddenly gotten a lot more direct, huh…?”

Perhaps this was the influence of her having overcome the Trials. There was a type of confidence blooming from Emilia’s demeanor and expression. It was a good trend for Emilia, long prone to putting herself down and understating her own worth.

Subaru had been unable to deal with all the problems of the Sanctuary with his own power no matter what he tried. Now that he had others to help cover his weaknesses and deficiencies, enabling this miracle that allowed them all to be together, he wanted to thank her.

“If nothing else, though, I meant to take on the toughest job and stuff…”

“I won’t allow something so thoughtless. If Subaru runs around and does everything, we won’t even have a reason to be here. If anything, Subaru has been running around a little too much.”

“Er, but I’m way short on firepower, so running around is about the only tactic I have.”

“But that will not be the case going forward, will it?”

Emilia was stroking Ram’s head atop her lap as she spoke, smiling at how they were both understating the other’s worth. Deducing exactly what her words were getting at, Subaru rubbed under his nose with a finger as he replied, “Ahhh.”

He’d overlooked a lot of things and had ended up being saved by many people around him, but he’d also gained pretty much everything he needed. He probably would never be worrying about things alone ever again.

“

“Well, even I can read the mood enough not to intrude on that.”

They’d had untold opportunities to speak to each other, yet they’d never taken advantage of them.

All the words left unspoken must have piled high enough to become a mountain.

2

—The Witch sleeping in the transparent coffin was just as beautiful as the day she’d died.

“Mother…”

In the small room in the deepest part of the tomb in which the coffin was placed, the remains of Echidna the Witch rested in silence.

In front of those remains, Beatrice was stricken with such worry that her feet felt like they couldn’t stay grounded. She felt neither the sense of elation from during the battle nor the sense of loss and liberation from losing the archive of forbidden books—she felt guilt.

The Witch had long, beautiful white hair and a comely face that spoke of intellect and tolerance. Though the instances were rare, her memories of the Witch regarding her with soft smiles came rushing back.

There and then, the memories of how her mother looked, which she had been on the verge of forgetting after four centuries, were fresh once more, digging their way into Beatrice’s chest.

“Has Betty managed to uphold her promise to Mother, I wonder? …I am sorry.”

Stroking the edge of the cracked coffin with her finger, Beatrice began their first meeting in four centuries with an apology.

Beatrice had lost both the intellect of the Witch and the book of knowledge given to her upon their parting. She had deigned to come crawling back, her promise unfulfilled.

“Betty never met That Person…and the book has been burned away. Are the words *I am sorry* enough to make up for it, I wonder?”

Beatrice judged herself to be a poor daughter.

She was a foolish girl who’d been unable to fulfill Mother’s last request with four centuries on hand to do it. She could not help but regret that from the bottom of her heart as she reunited with her mother, who by rights she should have been unable to even face.

"…For all that, you have quite a relieved look upon your face, do you noooot?"

The man on the other side of the coffin—Roswaal—easily guessed how Beatrice truly felt.

As always, the man was disgustingly good at pointing things out. However, Beatrice could not help but put her discordant feelings aside. It was hardly unrelated to the man having taken off his makeup and exposing his bare face.

"You look most relieved of all, Roswaal. It is not like you to stand before Betty without your makeup on… Truly, is it like you at all, I wonder?"

Roswaal said nothing in response to Beatrice's words. All he did was make a lonely smile.

That was even more unusual. Lowering her eyes at his reaction, Betty continued:

"Besides, you must have your own things to say to Mother. To you… To your family, meeting Mother again was your long-cherished desire, I suppose."

More than anyone else, Beatrice witnessed the changes four centuries had wrought upon the House of Roswaal—founded by the first Roswaal who apprenticed under Echidna.

In the battle against Hector the Devil, Roswaal had lost all his capacity to use magic rather than his life. After Echidna's passing, he had entered the archive of forbidden books and immersed himself in search of something, and then he died, entrusting his dream to the next generation.

For each and every generation since, the head of the household inherited the name of *Roswaal*. The genius of the first Roswaal was rediscovered time and time again, and the House of Mathers grew.

Roswaal L. Mathers was the living compilation of all that had come before him.

Beatrice was actually quite bewildered that his talent surpassed even that of the first Roswaal, who Echidna herself had considered remarkable. The likes of him had never been seen in the past; none other could claim to be the world's mightiest magic user.

"Yet, even with all that talent, you could not escape from the curse that binds the Mathers family. You are ghosts, dreaming of reuniting with my dear, departed mother… I sympathize with you, if only slightly."

Beatrice was speaking of Roswaal's way of life, able only to

obey the destiny laid out generation after generation. His family greatly resembled her, continually bound by a single pact made four centuries prior.

Ironically, the moments she had spent with the first Roswaal before the day of that pact four hundred years before remained fresh in her mind.

"—May I ask you one thing?"

It was as Beatrice reminisced that Roswaal raised but a single finger and posed that question. The low, earnest tone of his voice made her lift her face. Beatrice tacitly consented with her silence.

"I must wonder, did Young Subaru become That Person for you?"

The question made Beatrice's breath catch for a moment. This was not surprise—No, there was surprise. It was just that she felt no impact from Roswaal's words.

She was surprised by her own heart, which didn't ache as expected at the words *That Person*.

"…Why do you laugh?"

"Ahhh, sorry about that, I suppose. I am not particularly laughing at you. Perhaps I simply find myself amusing at the moment. I truly am such a fool."

How easy had it been for her to forget the proposition that had bound her heart so much the instant after she had let go of it?

It probably was not so. It was not that she had forgotten. She had said good-bye to That Person forevermore.

"That man… Subaru is not suited whatsoever to be Betty's That Person."

"*Whatsoever*, you say… That is a rather harsh assessment."

"Is that really true, I wonder? Betty is strict. Is that why every opportunity in four hundred years came to nothing, I wonder? … Betty's selfishness is why the idea of That Person controlled her fate for so long."

Beatrice now understood just a little of the feelings of the people who had tried to bring her out of the archive of forbidden books.

By no means had all of them stretched hands toward Beatrice out of nothing but their own selfish ambitions. Among them were those who Beatrice had continually driven away with her own thoughts and words.

"Then how was someone like you able to come out? How did

Subaru become That Person?"

"Did I not say it already, I wonder? Subaru is not suited to be That Person whatsoever. But that is fine. Betty has chosen Subaru. Not That Person—but Subaru, I suppose."

Beatrice's reply caused Roswaal's breath to catch as he opened his eyes wide.

Perhaps it was an answer difficult for an adherent of Echidna's like Roswaal to accept. Beatrice, standing in the same position just a short time prior, painfully understood just how he felt.

It was because she understood that she thought it necessary to elaborate.

"When I wanted Subaru to become That Person, he laughed it off. He prattled on with something like, *I can make you happier than some guy whose face you don't even know*, I suppose."

"That is…a most arrogant answer."

"But I do not mind him being pushy."

Compared with an array of polite words spoken to Beatrice to tell her what to do or a speech on how she should put Echidna's intellect to use, he was akin to an unadorned blade.

"But is that really fine with you? No matter how you might struggle, you will never be Subaru's first. One can tell just by watching how he lives… I know this to be true."

"Roswaal, are you misunderstanding something, I wonder?"

"Misunderstanding?"

"Betty did not leave the archive of forbidden books because Subaru made her his number one. Did Betty not leave the archive because she wants to make Subaru her number one, I wonder?"

—*Choose Me.* He had said that to her.

I'll be too lonely to live without you. Those had been his words.

She thought them very convenient words. Yet, they had resonated within Beatrice, shaking her heart.

And the instant she took his hand and left the archive of forbidden books, she knew a feeling of liberation that brought tears to her eyes.

She was well aware that she was defying both Mother and Roswaal, committing a terrible betrayal against them.

But her heart was already set. Her hand had already joined with his.

"

to accuse her of betrayal, she could do nothing save gently accept them. Such was the resolve within—

"—No matter how much time passes, you never change, Beatrice. You are the same as you were then."

"—?"

His words had an odd ring to them that made Beatrice faintly knit her brows. What he said made Beatrice suspicious, but the tone of his voice even more so. It felt so very gentle, soft, and nostalgic.

"Truly, you and I have not had nearly enough conversations. It has been so ever since we were at Teacher's side."

"Teacher…?"

When she heard Roswaal's gentle word, a term that should never have been heard from his lips, a shudder ran through her.

Simultaneously, a possibility arose in the back of Beatrice's mind from the very depths of the time she had experienced.

It couldn't be. Yet, if it was so—

"—Roswaal, is that you?"

"I have always been Roswaal?"

"No…! That is not what I… You—you surely know what I meant!"

"I jest. It is precisely so, Beatrice. It is I—the very same Roswaal."

The instant he changed how he referred to himself, Beatrice saw two Roswaals overlap.

A tall, handsome man with long indigo hair overlapped with a young man who possessed the same characteristic features. This was the young man who had once doted on Echidna, who had asked the Witch to mentor him, and who Beatrice had lived alongside.

"It couldn't be… Are you using soul transcription, the theory of immortality that Mother pursued? But that failed."

"The soul will not graft to an empty vessel. That issue was a temporary impasse…one that I overcame by force. If the issue is compatibility between vessel and soul, this can be eliminated through greater proximity of the two."

Beatrice could not conceal her utter shock when she grasped the meaning of those words.

When Echidna's research into immortality failed and led instead to Ryuzu Meyer becoming the core of the Sanctuary, the Witch attempted to make efficient use of the replication technique created

as a by-product, yet in terms of her lust for knowledge, she had erred. In the end, unable to graft the soul of another to an empty vessel, the research was considered a failure—but Roswaal had succeeded where she had not.

The first Roswaal had transferred himself to the bodies of the Mathers children in an unbroken line, reaching all the way to the present generation.

"Are you going to denounce me as inhuman, Beatrice?"

Such was the question Roswaal posed to Beatrice. Unlike back then, Roswaal's left and right eye colors differed; only half of the blue from his original form remained.

Beatrice felt like that tentative blue eye was waiting for her to unleash blame upon him.

Did Roswaal wish to be punished again? Just like how she had confessed her sin of breaking her pact with Echidna to her mother's remains? —Did he want to be condemned for his own foolish actions?

Condemned by Beatrice, the one who best understood her mother, the woman who was the object of his tenacious, unrequited love that had caused nothing but trouble to others across four hundred long years.

"Roswaal. Would you squat down over here for a moment, I wonder?"

"—Here?"

When Beatrice pointed to the flooring to the side of the coffin, Roswaal closed one eye. When that blue eye saw Beatrice nod, Roswaal seemed dubious as he knelt there on one knee. Gazing upon this, Beatrice removed her right shoe, firmly gripping it with her right hand.

"Clench your teeth."

"Clench my… *Guh?!*"

She slammed the shoe in her hand into the side of his face, currently at just the right height.

She made a very pleasant sound as Roswaal's head reeled, eyes wide open. Glancing at him, Beatrice put the shoe in her hand back on her foot once more.

The refreshed look on Beatrice's face brought Roswaal, now with a red and taut cheek, back to his senses.

"W-was that something like your very own mark of disdain just now?"

“Not really. Do I even know why you want me to be angry at what you have done, I wonder? …Your actions are unworthy of praise. But is there anyone who has the right to blame you save the children whose bodies you have made your own, I wonder? *Ugh*, is all that Betty thinks of the matter.”

“*Ugh*, is it…? Then what was that blow just now for?”

It seems a poor reason to strike me, Roswaal seemed to be trying to say. Beatrice stuck her tongue out at him.

Certainly, Beatrice took no issue with the soul transcription. But —

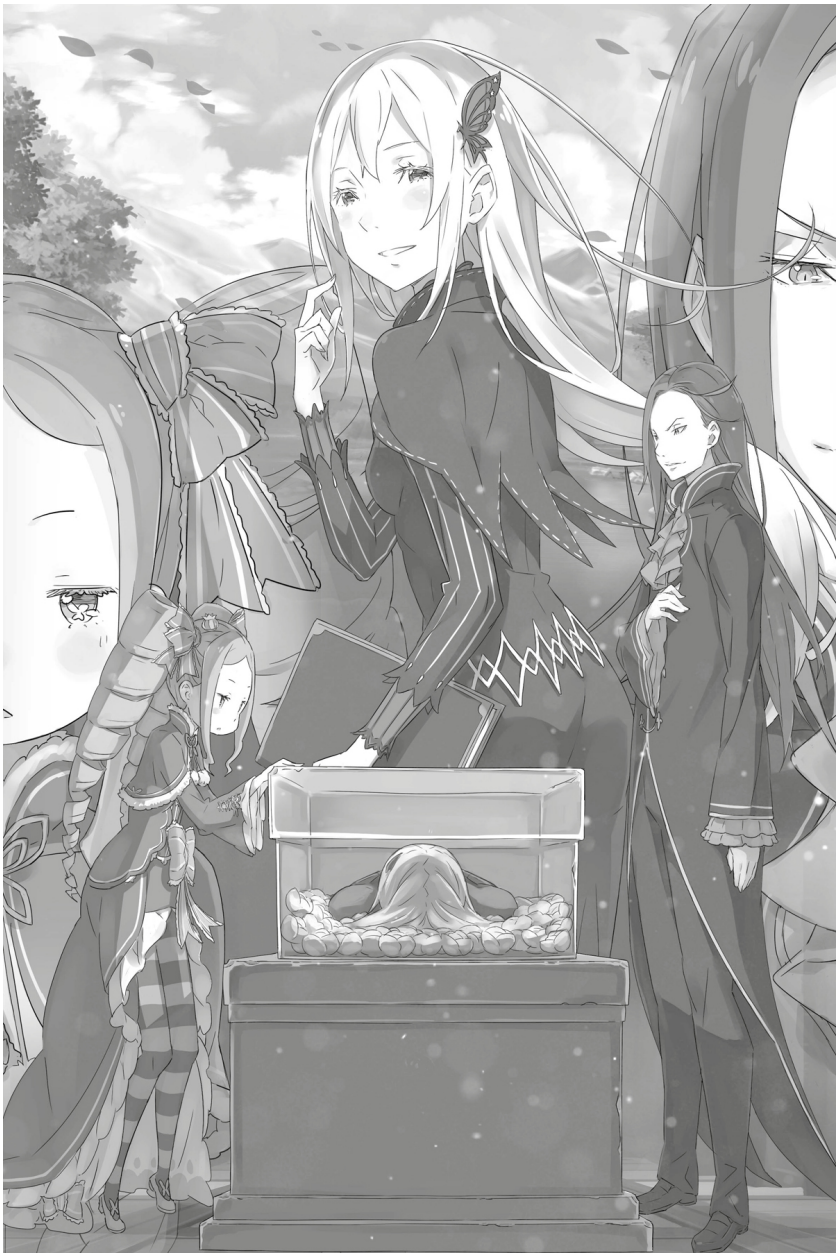
“Is it not obvious this is payback for the archive of forbidden books burning down, I wonder?!”

“—About the mansio—”

“Betty is very generous and therefore will leave it at that… If Subaru forgives you, then perhaps I can, too, I suppose.”

Interrupting Roswaal, Beatrice let the words pour from her lips, preventing further discussion of the matter. The demonstration of her intent made Roswaal fall silent.

Enumerating Roswaal’s schemes would require far more than the fingers on both hands. If he counted every single one of them, Beatrice would probably be unable to forgive him anymore—hence, she would not let him speak them.



Besides, if Beatrice's eyes did not deceive her, Roswaal had lost his book of knowledge.

“

would slip into despair didn't even register as a concern to Subaru.

"Maybe I'm just deluding myself that it's all going to just work itself out…"

"Hee-hee, you've become quite a believer in Beatrice…but you two have always gotten along so well, haven't you? I can *really* understand how you two formed a pact."

"Now and again, I wished she'd talk like we get along a little more… Also, is that Puck?"

Scratching his cheek after hearing Emilia's honest opinion, Subaru then gestured toward the blue crystal on her neck. This had been his trump card in the battle against Garfiel, the same thing that had bolstered Ram's resolve in the Sanctuary, and now served as the icon of the Great Spirit who slumbered in tranquility at Emilia's side.

Having broken his pact and pushed himself several times over, this was the sealed bed in which Puck had fallen into a deep sleep.

"I wanted to tell him, *Thanks for the assist*, but that's not happening in his state, is it?"

"Mm, no, it's not. Seems he pushed himself a little too hard; there's no way… Even this stone isn't strong enough to wake Puck up. Doesn't look like I'll be able to talk and joke around with him just yet."

"But he'll definitely be back someday, right?"

Closing one eye, Subaru confirmed something that didn't even need to be said aloud. For one moment alone, Emilia closed her eyes and said, "Yes," nodding back. The conviction of her expression was exceedingly dignified and beautiful.

"…You've sure changed, Emilia-tan. It's like you're still every bit as cute, but you're stronger now."

"If that's so, it's thanks to you and everyone else, Subaru. I've always been on the receiving end before. I need to hurry up and give back to everyone in all kinds of ways."

"When it comes to just taking, I feel like I've done a lot of that, too…"

Subaru and Emilia both keenly felt their own powerlessness. That did not mean they would be licking each other's wounds, for they also took pride in having become more dependable.

"Incidentally, Subaru… Um…"

Subaru was immersed in deep sentiments when Emilia abruptly tossed her voice his way. That voice made him go "ahhh" and come

back to his senses, but Subaru's eyes bulged as he turned toward Emilia.

"E-Emilia-tan?! Your face is super red all of a sudden—are you all right?!"

"I-I'm all right. Completely fine. More importantly, there is something we need to discuss."

"R-right. I guess, um, please go right ahead…"

When for some reason Emilia broke into formal language, Subaru stumbled into a formal reply of his own.

Emilia, red to the tips of her ears, made no comment about his response, staring straight at Subaru before continuing.

"Um… Subaru, you said you…l-love me, yes?"

"Er, ah, yes. I did say that. I love you. I super love you."

"—! That…that makes me really, *really* happy, but…"

Subaru got a bad feeling as Emilia, blushing hard, trailed off—if he had to put it into words, he was afraid she was about to say, *Let's be friends instead.*

"W-wait! Wait a sec! I-I'm in this for the long haul, so to speak!"

"Th-that's… I understand that already. But…if I don't do this properly… Back when we were in the dragon carriage and the time at the tomb, I never gave you a proper reply, Subaru…and…"

Even as an unbearable anxiousness shot through him, Subaru lent his ears to Emilia. The present situation didn't necessarily seem like the worst-case scenario, but his chances didn't seem too great, either. If anything, it was like the status quo ante.

As long as she didn't find his repeated confessions of love terribly intrusive, Subaru was ready to bounce back as many times as it took.

However, it was about to become crystal clear that they were on completely different pages.

"It's just—I think we need to have a proper talk about the baby in my belly!"

"…Excuse me?"

"I don't know if it will be a boy or a girl, but we need to give it all the love and attention it needs! Still, I don't know anything about these things… That's why I have to discuss it with the child's

father…”

“Emilia-tan, wait, hold on, like, seriously, please wait a second…”

Emilia’s face was red and teary, but Subaru’s mind couldn’t keep up.

Calm. He needed to be calm. A baby in Emilia’s belly? Emilia was the mother? Subaru was the father? He didn’t know what any of that meant. Subaru was positive that he had not climbed the final stairs of adulthood yet.

“Emilia-tan, by *baby*, you mean a little kid, right?”

“Th-that’s right. It’s a really big deal in the middle of the royal selection…but it isn’t the baby’s fault it’s going to be born, so I want to give the child all the love I can. I just wanted to tell you that.”

He admired the nobility of Emilia’s resolute heart. He could even appreciate the beauty in her kind words.

But they were talking past each other. It was almost as if people had children differently in this world.

“Emilia-tan, you know babies aren’t delivered by birds or harvested from cabbage patches, right?”

“But babies are made when a man and a woman kiss, aren’t they?”

Subaru was in shock.

Emilia’s lack of knowledge was a part of it, but he was mainly astounded by how adorable her misunderstanding was.

“Subaru? Um, Subaru? What’s wrong?”

As Subaru fell silent, Emilia seemed worried as she peered into his face with the look of someone who had accepted her impending motherhood. That was commendable. However, her misunderstanding inflicted a grievous wound upon a pure heart.

He couldn’t help but wonder if it was better to simply declare himself the father of the nonexistent child.

“Subaru, could it be that you regret kissing me…?”

“Absolutely not. In fact, I’d love to do it again and again!!”

“Oh…okay…”

The misunderstanding deepened further still. Her blushing face made Subaru regret how he had replied reflexively.

Given Emilia’s mindset at the moment, Subaru’s words were tantamount to saying he wanted to have lots and lots of children with her. Certainly, there was a part of him that did wish for that,

but his top priority was setting Emilia straight.

“C-curse you, Puck…!!”

Subaru directed an angry murmur toward the absent kitty spirit, who continued to sleep deep inside the magic crystal.

—In the back of his mind, he felt like he could see the kitty spirit putting a paw on his head and sticking his tongue out with a *thbpttt*.

4

The instant the blow landed, his cheekbone groaned under the impact. His tall body was easily flung into the air and slammed into the wall. It did not end there. The momentum sent him right through the fragile wooden wall, blowing his body into the snowy outdoors.

“

Those assembled inside were the principal actors involved in the latest incident. That said, it still amounted to quite a large number of people, which made Subaru deeply appreciate just how greatly their proverbial family had grown.

The mansion team had caught up on the dawn after Emilia's imaginary pregnancy crisis.

Fortunately, everyone who had been present at the mansion fire was safe and sound, with Garfiel and Frederica, Otto and Petra, and Ram all returning in one piece to the Sanctuary via a dragon carriage drawn by Patlash.

After, with Subaru plus Emilia and Beatrice of the Sanctuary team, as well as Ryuzu in attendance to represent the Sanctuary, the participants amounted to a whole eleven people.

"From the perspective of the royal selection, this might seem like one small step. But it's one giant step for the Emilia camp…!"

"Wow, that sounds *really* impressive… But you're absolutely right. That means I'll have to work even harder now."

Taking Subaru's silly talk completely seriously, Emilia earnestly sought to repay the trust in her. Setting the whole baby-in-her-belly thing aside, her genuine, forward-looking nature was one of the things that made her beautiful.

Indeed, she was a little too serious, which made relieving her of the baby misunderstanding quite an arduous chore.

"*Ahem*, I'd better straighten myself out before the conversation goes off the rails. Let's get right to the point. Should I assume everyone here knows everything that happened already? What comes after is the jury's verdict in regards to the accused…"

To be perfectly honest, it was a difficult issue to broach, yet there was no means to avoid it.

Subaru scratched his face as he moved the conference forward, making all the other Cathedral attendees shift their glances to the rear—toward Roswaal, lying limply on a couch as Ram offered her lap to his head.

"…Oh my? Could it be, you have not yet made enough sport of me in my defenseless staaate?"

"Don't make me out to be the bad guy. That was settling things. Well, some of it was what some might call excessive, though…"

Roswaal's abrasive words made Subaru recall the violent scene that had taken place not long ago.

In summary, it was a ceremony where Roswaal, the mastermind

behind many of their troubles, was punched once by every one of his victims. What had begun with Garfiel's bare fist was followed by Frederica's beastly fist, Patlash's charge, and so on and so forth.

Personally, the one Subaru liked most was Petra swinging a wet towel right into Roswaal's face. The moist slap had a really nice echo to it, instilling force and exhilaration that went beyond what the eye could see.

"Not to trivialize all that, but it's what brought everyone to the same table so we could talk. That said, there is one little thing I wanted to say about your standpoint…"

Cutting off his words there, Subaru looked not at Roswaal but at Ram as she let him rest his head in her lap. Accepting his gaze, Ram said, "What?" as she narrowed her pink eyes.

"Even if you're not at full health, you just stood back and watched while people settled things with Roswaal. I was sure you'd flip out seeing him get smacked around that much."

"What a foolish thing to say… Even Ram does not think Master Roswaal is someone who is never mistaken. If being punched is the natural course of events, he must accept what he deserves. But Ram is free to treat him with great gentleness after the fact. To not comprehend such a thing is the height of foolishness."

Subaru grimaced hearing her call him a fool at both the head and the tail of her remarks. Beatrice heaved a hearty sigh at Ram's obstinacy in Subaru's place.

"Goodness, does this girl love trouble, I wonder? Even after incurring such severe burns to her belly… Had Betty not been here, scars would have remained for certain."

"I am deeply grateful to Lady Beatrice for healing me. However, that does not mean I care to be lectured as to how I may love someone with this life of mine and a body that is alive and well."

"…I don't intend to be quite that kind, I suppose. I will merely say it is a difficult life you choose."

As always, Ram fearlessly pursued her love. During her fierce battle to halt Roswaal's schemes, she had suffered wounds so grievous, they had put her on death's door, but apparently, they were not nearly bad enough to get in the way of her feelings.

Since Ram was by no means blinded by her love, Beatrice could only breathe a hearty sigh.

Naturally, there was someone else present who couldn't accept things just like that.

“—Figures Ram ain’t bendin’ one bit. But, General, you serious about this?”

Speaking this with a noise from his fangs was Garfiel, standing between Ryuzu and Frederica. He was giving Roswaal a sharp glare in contrast to the smiling face he’d had right after settling prior business.

The glint in his eyes held blatant hostility within them.

“You’re seriously gonna have this bastard be on our side? Just don’t sit right with me.”

“Garfiel…”

“Maybe we haven’t smacked him enough? Ahhh, yeah, we definitely ain’t smacked him enough! How much has that bastard done up until now? If it weren’t for the general, the village’d be rabbit food, and the folks at the mansion would’ve been toyed with and killed by the belly woman! All ’cause that bastard planned it. Ya don’t know when he’ll come chop our heads off in our sleep!”

Garfiel howled and took a step forward that made the Cathedral faintly tremble. But there was no one present who could immediately refute his words. Garfiel’s opinion had sound logic behind it. Roswaal had simply done that much.

He’d exposed many lives to danger for the sake of his own objective. As a matter of fact, Subaru had personally and repeatedly witnessed a great many deaths with his own eyes, present company included.

—It had taken a miracle to set this situation right.

Subaru shared the same anger Garfiel had. He also shared the feeling that Roswaal could not be among them.

“But even so, we need Roswaal’s power.”

“General…!!”

“There’s no replacing Roswaal’s cooperation if Emilia’s gonna fight her way through this royal-selection business. If we lose him as her sponsor, Emilia will be forced to drop out. Of course he’s got to pay compensation…but we can’t just go *okay, see ya* and leave it at that.”

“Are ya tellin’ me to forgive the guy who tried to kill family of mine?!”

Garfiel’s words were emotional, yet the terrible pain in them struck Subaru.

Even if Subaru tried to suppress them with words and logic, Garfiel still probably wouldn’t accept it. Garfiel had nearly lost

Frederica and Ryuzu both.

To him, having fiercely fought as a one-man army to protect his family for over a decade, it was a betrayal most difficult to forgive.

"I…forgive the master."

"Sis?!"

But it was none other than Frederica who refuted Garfiel's assertions. His elder sister's words made Garfiel blink hard before powerfully clacking his fangs.

"What are ya sayin'?! This bastard tried to kill you and everyone else at the man…"

"Yet, even so, I am alive, thanks to you, Garf."

"That's just lookin' at things in hindsight, damn it!! This bastard almost killed my sis and my granny! But I'm supposed to just forgive him?!"

"…The master has taken care of me for more than ten years."

Frederica narrowed her jade eyes in the face of Garfiel's ragged voice. The deep affection that could be felt from her gaze showed she was deeply moved by the indignation of her younger brother, who had grown so much in the years they spent apart.

"I have borrowed from the master's power for the sake of my own goal. And I have arrived at this point having learned a great deal in the process. Put another way, I shall use the master's goodwill for the sake of my own goal. In one sense, does lending and borrowing not amount to the same thing?"

"You're gonna put life and debts on the same playin' field?! Sis, that's how you and Ram get used like tha…"

"Ahhh, I am sorry to intrude at such a passionate point, but may I have a word?"

Garfiel was still choking on Frederica's words when Otto urged a pause. "Ahhh?" went Garfiel, making a sour noise at the intrusion, but Otto deftly ignored it.

"For the moment, let us leave emotional arguments for later and speak of matters pragmatically. In other words, we must discuss to what degree the marquis intends to yield to us."

"…Another thing out of the blue. Feels a bit like we can't just drop this, though."

Otto sought to advance the conversation in a measured, businesslike tone, but Subaru knit his brows, unable to read what his intentions were. At that point, Otto said as a preamble, "It is a simple matter. To put it plainly, Garfiel's anger is justified. I am

quite vexed myself, and by any normal standard, one punch is hardly enough to lay everything to rest."

"Gotta say, I feel like you sure put your hips into the one punch you gave him…"

"I was merely collecting the interest on my losses. At any rate, it is clear to anyone's eyes that this cannot be simply forgiven, yes? I am certain the marquis understands this as well. In other words…"

"—The issue is therefore to what extent I intend to swallow the terms you offer."

At the end of the explanation, it was Roswaal who sat up and picked up where Otto left off. Closing one eye, he gazed back at Otto with his yellow eye.

"It would be poor of me to accept your terms before you have spoken them, I beliiiieve."

"Then I shall take my revenge with all interest accrued."

Otto was quite collected as he faced the marquis with a great deal of nerve. Roswaal made a pained smile.

"You say that so calmly. Now, returning to the previous subject, Garfiel is concerned that you do not know when I might become your enemy again…but this is an unnecessary worry."

"…How can ya be so sure? Ya think we'd believe a promise outta your mouth even a little?"

"Unfortunately, that would be impossible. So I shall prove it in a form visible to the eye."

Roswaal slowly shook his head before Garfiel's wariness. He stood up and proceeded to open his tunic, brusquely stripping away the bloodstained bandages wrapped around his upper body.

—Everyone held their breaths when they set their eyes upon Roswaal's exposed flesh.

It was known to all that Roswaal's body had been injured when the tomb had rejected him. But it was not those wounds that attracted their eyes now; rather, it was the pale, glowing symbols carved into his flesh.

Realizing at a glance that the symbols were vestiges of a magical ritual, Beatrice looked at Subaru.

"—Is this a vow sealed with a curse, I wonder?"

"A vow sealed with a curse? The hell? I've never heard of that one."

However, the malevolent ring of the words certainly fit the symbols perfectly.

Beatrice nodded as if to bolster Subaru's impression of them.

"Oaths come in various forms, such as pacts, vows, and covenants. Pacts, like the ones with spirits, are two-party oaths. Covenants extend across bloodlines. And vows bind a single party."

"Bind a single party?"

"Perhaps the one taking the vow expects to gain compensation commensurate with the oath that must be fulfilled, I suppose. As for carving a cursed seal into one's body like this, the effect would be…"

"—I have lost the battle. In accordance with my vow, I can inflict no harm upon you."

Receiving Beatrice's words, Roswaal divulged the vow he had taken.

"Should I renounce this vow, my soul shall be tainted and my flesh enveloped and burned away by purifying fire. And my soul shall fall into the void, never to return to Odo Ragna again. That is what I have sworn."

"S-somehow, that sounds really ominous…"

"Why? This is only appropriate. Did we not make a wager, you and I?"

He let out a wry laugh, or perhaps a muted, spontaneous laugh. The sentence that had come from Roswaal's loosened lips made Subaru sink into thought, immediately locating the answer—he was speaking about the final bet between them.

This was the result of the bet Subaru had made when he'd told Roswaal this would be his last attempt.

And should Roswaal have been triumphant, Subaru had said he would do Roswaal's bidding—

"My terms were that you'd genuinely come on board if I won."

"And so this cursed seal brings those terms to fruition."

"…In other words, if I'd lost…?"

"Then I would have carved this cursed seal into you. Had you defied the vow, you would have been reduced to cinders."

"Scary—!!"

He felt as if he'd unwittingly signed away his soul with no memory of the act whatsoever. As a matter of fact, it was precisely so, but the better way to view it was that there probably were no loopholes in the process.

Besides, whatever the possibilities, the fact remained that Roswaal himself had carved the cursed seal into his own body.

“Roswaal won’t betray us so long as that’s on him. How about it, Garfiel?”

“

said that was because of…”

“…I know that already. Don’t make a sad face like that, Granny.”

But Garfiel interrupted his grandmother’s words, replying with a coarse yet gentle voice. Surprisingly calm, he let out a deep breath before pointing straight at Roswaal.

“Swear it, Roswaal. I don’t care what ya swore before. I want ya to swear it again here and now.”

“

Petra wasn't in attendance as a representative of the village but because Frederica insisted Petra should be individually recognized as a servant of Roswaal Manor. She also did so partly out of faith that Petra was a clever enough girl to eventually arrive at the truth from fragmentary information alone.

"No matter how much…Master Subaru says so…I don't want to. The master… The lord did terrible things to the village, didn't he, even though everyone trusted their lord? I did, too. I thought he was a good person."

"…Those words do wound me deeply."

The blame levied by the little girl made even Roswaal frown.

Cutting out the interests of the faction and the finer circumstances, Petra's feelings as a direct victim were the most appropriate of all. That wasn't because she was a child. It was a straight and honest assessment of just how much faith Roswaal had accumulated as liege lord and just how deep his betrayal had cut.

"But…but I don't want to make things hard for everyone by running my mouth like some ignorant little girl. But that's exactly why I absolutely won't forgive this. Still, that's all I'll do."

"

everyone in their camp scowling at Roswaal all at once. If this meant the end of the first stage of the meeting, they could move on to the issues the future would bring—

"Yes, I do."

It was then that a sole figure broke the silence and raised her hand.

It was Emilia, leader of the group, yet to offer her opinion on how to deal with Roswaal.

"Okay, Emilia-tan. This is the right time, so say whatever you want."

"Then I'll indulge myself and say this…"

Thus recognized by Subaru, Emilia stared straight at Roswaal. Receiving her gaze, Roswaal awaited Emilia's words with a meek expression. It was unclear just what thoughts lurked beneath.

"All of you are being *really* strange. Roswaal still hasn't done the most important thing, has he? We can't end this conversation until he does."

"The most important thing…?"

"When you've done something wrong, you have to say you're sorry."

Emilia's statement left absolutely everyone taken aback, eyes wide open.

"Earlier, everyone was telling you to prove you've reflected on this and that, and Roswaal swore on his teacher, but there's something he should have said before that, isn't there? Roswaal, have you said it to everyone even once? I sure didn't hear you."

Emilia was flushed and in a huff as she spoke perfectly bluntly to Roswaal.

The contents of her words sounded astoundingly childish, leaving everyone at a loss for words. But Emilia was not speaking in jest. She was expressing her genuine anger.

This, she did to make him do the obvious, natural thing that everyone had forgotten about.

"—Apologize, Roswaal."

"Eh?"

"It's the least we can expect from a person who's gonna be with us from now on."

Roswaal looked thoroughly taken aback at Subaru following Emilia's example, boldly speaking those words.

Subaru's intentions were conveyed to everyone in the

Cathedral. All eyes gathered upon Roswaal. Then Roswaal, consternated at the situation he found himself in after coming this far, drew in his breath, and—

"—Yes, that will do."

After watching Roswaal apologize, Emilia flashed an impressive smile.

6

"That is quite a miserable-looking face."

"…So it's you, huh, Beako?"

Subaru raised his eyebrows as a cute face poked over his shoulder, peering intently at him.

He'd been sitting on the floor, deep in thought. Subaru made a pained smile as he realized he hadn't noticed someone had approached him. He dusted his pants off as he rose to his feet.

They were in the coffin room in the deepest portion of the tomb. No one else was here, so he'd come to think things over.

"What are you doing in a place like this while staring so intently at the corpse of Betty's mother, I wonder?"

"I was just thinking of the future like a normal person, but your phrasing is gonna land me in a heap of trouble!"

"Not really. If Subaru has an unspeakable hobby, I shall not reveal it. I will think *ugh*, however."

"Seriously, if you ever think *ugh* as soon as I come to mind, then I'm never gonna recover!"

Though they bantered much like before, their intimacy was incomparable to anything prior, even including that exchange. Mysteriously, ever since their pact, Beatrice was just too cute for Subaru to resist.

It wasn't romantic love, but it was undoubtedly affection. He wanted his stomach filled with it full-time. That was simply how he felt.

Thinking about it calmly, he seemed to have had quite a bit of that feeling even back when he first met her.

"Does your face reveal yet another worthless thought in your head, I wonder?"

"It ain't worthless at all. I was thinking about you, Beako. You're so adorable, it puts me in a bind."

"R-really, now…? Certainly, that would be a problem. But

perhaps I prefer to continue doing so, I wonder?"

That was so cute that Subaru picked Beatrice up without a word of warning. This surprised Beatrice, then made her angry at him in turn. She smacked him, but it didn't hurt, so he let it slide.

Then, after getting their fill of messing around, Beatrice's demeanor became serious as she shifted her gaze toward the coffin.

"…This is your mother, right?"

"More importantly, this is Echidna, Subaru. Not the 'Witch of Greed' you are familiar with."

Subaru echoed a question first hailed by Emilia, wondering about the two different Echidnas. At present, neither she nor Subaru had found a suitable answer to what that actually meant.

Subaru, too, had been surprised the first time he'd encountered the Witch's remains inside that room. For Beatrice's sake, he was simply grateful from the bottom of his heart that it truly was her Echidna sleeping there.

He was glad Beatrice had been reunited with her mother, even if only Echidna's remains were left, though there were other reunions that could never take place.

"It's…really too bad that Miss Shima and your…friend from the crystal couldn't make it."

"…Has it not been four centuries since we parted, I wonder? There is no helping it now."

Beatrice's halting murmur felt like she was mostly putting on a brave front. Subaru turned his face toward the sky.

Echidna's old laboratory site was within the Forest of Cremaldi. When the Sanctuary had been liberated, Ryuzu Meyer and the crystal sealing her, both of which formed the core of the Sanctuary's barrier, had vanished together.

He'd been told the coffin where the Witch slept, along with the magic crystal sealing the girl within, had been the keys to the barrier. Shima had sacrificed herself to open these, granting them true liberation.

Albeit, perhaps she would be angry at having what she did referred to as a sacrifice—truly, it would be just like her to say she'd done her duty, cutting a path open for the youngsters' future.

He had little doubt that deep down, it was for the sake of her beloved Garfiel, though.

The day was surely approaching when they could match her proud way of life. At the very least, he wanted to swear he would

live up to it all, bringing no shame to what she had bequeathed to them.

"Well, even if I made a lofty-sounding vow like that, it wouldn't sound very convincing coming from me."

"—? Subaru, what are you smiling to yourself for, I wonder? It feels creepy."

"Er, nothi… Wait, creepy?!"

"Ah, maybe not, I suppose! I did not mean you are extremely creepy! Only a little, I suppose!"

The naked insult and guileless poison thrust several times deeper than anything preceding it. When Subaru fell to his knees, Beatrice hastily and earnestly tried to cheer him up.

It took a little while after that for Subaru to recover, at which point he let out a long sigh.

"*Whew*, I was in danger of dying from shock. I understand a little of how Puck felt…"

"You have grown quite conceited if you think you can understand Puckie's feelings, Subaru. But could you not forget that feeling of devotion, I wonder? If you do not, you will become a fine spirit mage in no time."

"Yeah, yeah… Er, hearing the words *spirit mage* made me remember just now, but you were seriously awesome. I've never been able to let loose with magic like that before. Sure was one heck of a ride!"

He hadn't had the time to calmly think back upon it, but Subaru's manly heart had danced during that battle against the Great Rabbit.

He'd gone with the flow during the collapse of the archive of forbidden books and formed a pact with Beatrice. Subaru's original objective was to bring Beatrice out of the archive, so forming a pact relationship, as a spirit mage was nothing but a by-product of that goal. Even so, it had been an incredible experience.

Subaru's honest appraisal made Beatrice's cheeks stiffen. Her gaze wandered about.

"Subaru, about that… In other words, I may have something important to say about spirit mages, I suppose."

"Oh? Why all the formality?"

"This is a matter between Betty and Subaru that cannot be put off."

Beatrice seemed rather subdued as she sat Subaru back down

on the floor. He had a bad feeling about this, having barely finished hearing Emilia get similarly formal before talking about her imaginary pregnancy.

That said, now that she'd stated it concerned the pair's future, all he could do was quietly listen.

"First, Subaru formed a pact with Betty as a spirit mage…but Betty is somewhat different compared to a regular spirit, I suppose. Therefore, there are certain things that differ from what would be common sense for other practitioners."

"Well, you don't usually see humanoid spirits, and I know you're especially cute."

At present, Subaru knew exactly two spirit mages: Emilia and Julius.

Emilia had a pact with Puck but also had formed pacts with lesser spirits besides him. In contrast, Julius had pacts with multiple quasi-spirits more powerful than lesser spirits, which meant he was a powerful practitioner himself.

Technically, the evil spirit Petelgeuse had been something similar, but that was a case best left forgotten.

"Betty is an artificial spirit created by Mother. Did you know this, I wonder? Mother infused Betty with special power…but in turn, she has certain flaws."

"Flaws, huh? What sort?"

"Betty's flaws… First is that she monopolizes a contractor, I suppose."

Betty was red-faced as she explained her own shortcomings. Subaru, girded for whatever issue might come flying out, let out a silly-sounding "huh?" at the detail thereof.

"*Monopolize*—you mean you're a greedy girl? Don't worry. Relax, you're the only spirit for me."

"That may be so, but that is not the point! The short version is that a spirit mage contracted with Betty is unable to contract with other spirits and lesser spirits, I suppose. There are no exceptions whatsoever."

"…Ahhh, that's what you meant. In other words, I'm all out of contracts."

The gist was that the cost of maintaining Beatrice as a spirit was high, chewing up a spirit mage's entire capacity. No free room remained to employ other spirits because of that.

"So there's no using lesser spirits depending on circumstances

or anything like that. Well, that's slightly disappointing, but I'll just take it in stride. No way I'm letting you go so I can pick up other spirits."

"…W-well, that's only natural, I suppose. Of course you would not. Might one even call that ordinary sound judgment, I wonder?"

Beatrice was unable to hide how happy Subaru's reply made her. Subaru gave her head another few circular strokes. Beatrice was letting Subaru do so when she cleared her throat with an audible "*ahem.*"

"Actually, there is still more. But compared with the matter just now, is it no great issue whatsoever, I wonder?"

"So the hurdles got a lot lower. Okay, hit me. Tell me anything."

"Er, this is mildly embarrassing… However, Betty is rather… fuel-inefficient."

"Now you're talking like you're some kind of car."

In video games, powerful magic and summoning spells consumed a lot of MP. Efficiency was calculated by comparing the usage cost to power, but he had no idea how hard it was for Beatrice to say something that was probably incredibly difficult to admit.

"Er? You say that, but you hurled huge spells into the Great Rabbit one after another, right? You even let me use your mana, 'cause it's not like you were sucking it out of me."

"Was that mana not what Betty stored away over a long period of time, I wonder? Draining Subaru thousands and thousands of times would not be sufficient to suddenly use that much mana in our first battle."

"That figures. Incidentally, by *stored over a long period of time*, you mean…"

"…I—I suppose I was helping myself to mana from everyone at the mansion a little at a time."

Beatrice was red-faced as she divulged the information, perhaps embarrassing from a spirit's point of view. Subaru didn't have a very clear idea at how unladylike using some kind of mana drain was.

"Beako, it seems like you've done some deep reflection about it, so I won't poke fun at you. Well, as your contractor, I'll just have to put up with whatever you're going to take from me. How much is stored in this vault anyway?"

It hardly needed to be said that Subaru's mana capacity was lower than that of the average person. If he was to work around Beatrice's poor fuel efficiency, he needed to break down how to make good use of what had been stored to date.

Naturally, he had to get an idea of just how much magic energy was left, but—

"—Nothing."

"…Hmm?"

"Did I not say *nothing*, I wonder? What was stored across four centuries flew out the door during our first battle. Though I still held on to a majority of it despite the loss of the archive, the Al Shamak that served as the finishing blow…might have depleted it completely, I suppose."

"

ENDING CHAPTER

OFFBEAT STEPS UNDER THE MOONLIGHT

1

—The dignified great hall's appearance had changed into something completely at odds with what Subaru remembered.

A number of candlesticks lined the red carpet covering the floor. The flickering of the red flames lent the chamber a solemn atmosphere that caused those in attendance to unconsciously straighten their backs.

Familiar, nostalgic faces were lined against the walls in orderly fashion. It was because those were familiar, nostalgic faces that they looked amusing while dressed in solemn, ceremonial outfits.

Particularly hilarious were Garfiel, locked in a brutal struggle with his formal garb, and Otto, who looked every bit the pampered nobleman. The contrast with their normal appearances was really something else. Were they deliberately trying to make him laugh…?

Frederica and the other servants treated their work uniforms as their ceremonial clothing, so it made sense that Ram was in her maid outfit as they walked in unison. Subaru drew in his breath when he realized there was someone right beside Ram.

—There, sitting in a chair, a blue-haired Sleeping Princess was also in attendance.

Perhaps this was Ram's idea of being considerate. Ram was glancing at him with an expression that feigned ignorance. He was so grateful that it hurt.

Petra was standing beside them, attending the ceremony with a dignified demeanor, wearing a dress that glimmered so much, no one would ever think she was a simple village girl. He could only let out a strained smile. No stage fright for her.

Standing beside Petra was Beatrice, whose normal clothing was plenty elaborate to begin with. She relaxed her lips slightly and stood straighter, feeling reassured at the sight of her partner, Subaru, keeping an eye out for her.

Then, when he shifted his gaze from the participants, turning his head toward the innermost part of the great hall—

“

the same light to reside in Subaru's and Emilia's differently colored eyes. Burning the beauty of the sight into his mind, Subaru presented the knight's sword to Emilia.

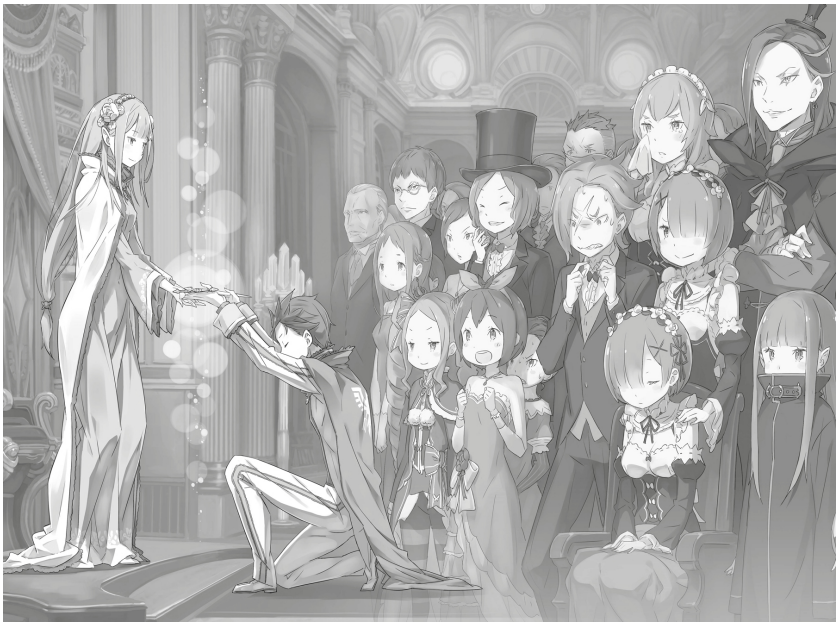
With graceful fingers, Emilia gently accepted the sword, which was presented to her like an offering. Her violet eyes were filled with deep emotions as she pointed the tip of the knight's sword skyward, seemingly as heavy as the feelings that permeated it.

Before Emilia, Subaru bowed his head once more, closing his eyes.

A knight's sword was his pride. A knight's body and head constituted his loyal spirit. Here, he offered both.

—A knight offering his life to his liege.

“



This time was different. It was true silence, with excitement, zeal, and expectations left far behind.

The right to break that silence had been granted to but a single one among them.

"—O sun watching over the dazzling world beneath. O stars watching over the sleeping world. O wind, O water, O earth, O light, O spirits that fill all."

The silence was broken.

Emilia wove the ceremony's prayer like a song.

"—O great world that has accepted you, raised you, and now sends you forth."

It trembled. His heart trembled.

The borders of his mind collapsed. His chaotic soul churned. That moment, all he wanted to do was drown in her blessing.

"—O pride, that which supported you, protected you, nurtured you."

He endured the mania rushing through him. He withstood the searing heat pounding at his heart. He waited for the question to come.

"—May you become someone worthy of all that protects you, of the world that has raised you, of the pride that sustains you. May you live without shame. Fear not, cower not, stray not. May your heart remain true."

The prayer was over.

The question was coming.

The set structure of the ceremony ended there. Not even Subaru knew the answer to the final question to come.

"—Just as you have aspired to until now, just as you have done for everything and everyone around you, do you swear to protect me from this moment forth?"

—But his heart already knew the answer to the question Emilia posed.

"On the sun, on the stars, on the spirits, on the world, on my pride—and—"

That moment, he listed everything in the prayer to express his conviction and his gratitude.

And before he put the vow on his lips, Subaru recalled in the back of his mind the images of those to whom he truly needed to

convey his gratitude. That was why his lips wove the words seemingly on their own.

“—on my father and my mother, I swear.”

“

Subaru was out on the terrace, showered by the nighttime breeze as he watched the festivities with distant eyes.

A dinner plate and drinking glass had been placed on the handrail, but he hadn't touched either. The burning sensation shooting up his neck made it unlikely he would manage to get anything down his throat.

Inside the manor, Petra was doing a little dance performance in her dress in the middle of the hall. It looked like a sort of dance that was often performed at festivals in Earlham Village, but Petra seemed to have arranged this one herself; the dignified way she carried herself meant she didn't look out of place even at a nobleman's court.

Dragged along by Petra and dancing with matching steps was a red-faced Beatrice. She desperately tried to maintain her composure, but Subaru couldn't help but notice her ears and the tip of her nose were trembling with bashfulness.

Mysteriously, Beatrice seemed unable to act headstrong whenever Petra was concerned. Petra seemed to have taken Subaru's words to heart and had somehow managed to make a friend out of Beatrice.

The heartwarming scene made Subaru feel more at ease when—

"—Watching something like that makes you deeply appreciate having brought Beatrice out, does it noooot?"

"Ugh."

A tall body abruptly cut into Subaru's peripheral vision, coming beside Subaru to rest its weight against the handrail. He glanced over to see Roswaal wearing a formal, long-sleeve dress outfit that differed from the norm.

With his long hair in proper order and wearing clothing with minimal pomp, he would be very much a handsome aristocrat at a glance. However—

"…All that kinda clashes with the clown makeup."

"Oh my, how harsh. But if I don't have this on, it just isn't me. Is that not sooooo?"

"I wish you'd respect the time, place, and circumstance for self-expression. Not that I'm one to talk, but this is a formal occasion, y'know?"

Subaru flashed an expression of exasperation at Roswaal, who was wearing his clown face without a shred of guilt. He was recalling his own barbaric actions that despoiled the royal-selection

conference. This said, that hadn't been a formal occasion, so his judgment was technically sound.

"Speaking of this formal occasion, I gotta say… You sure went all out for this conferring-knighthood thing."

"I had reasons to hurry. However, I believe you have yearned for this for quite some time."

"Well, you're not wrong about that, but I'm just not cut out for this stuff…"

Roswaal had poked right at the crux of the matter, leaving Subaru with a wry smile on his lips without any words to refute him.

—Subaru had craved knighthood ever since he found out about it. It qualified him to stand at Emilia's side.

Roswaal had a number of reasons for allowing Subaru this and holding a formal occasion for the event.

The ceremony to confer honors on Subaru would play up his meritorious deeds in quelling the White Whale and dispatching the Archbishop of Sloth, spreading the news to even neighboring kingdoms.

Ultimately, he wished to announce Subaru had become Emilia's knight to foreign and domestic interests alike. For that, it was necessary to confer knighthood over any mere medal, and with appropriate urgency, pomp, and ceremony at that.

"All that said, isn't allowing a knighthood ceremony in a place we're borrowing and staying at temporarily stretching our goodwill really far?"

"When you put it that way, it is difficult to denyyyy. Well, the Miload family is a branch of the Mathers family, and its head, Annerose, is head over heels for Lady Emilia. If we must live away until the main estate is restored and can serve in the burned mansion's place, should we not have a little fuuuuun with it?"

"You sure say that so casually…"

Roswaal tilted his glass as his lips loosened with amusement.

Annerose Miload—this was the name of the head of the household where Subaru and company were staying for about a month after Roswaal Manor had burned down. Her being a distant relative of Roswaal's and already being on good terms with Emilia beforehand made the place a perfect location for a temporary stay.

Seeing how close Emilia and Annerose, age nine, were made Subaru just a little jealous, though.

“Mentally speaking, Anne and Emilia are not as far apart as some might think. If anything, Anne puts on greater airs than Lady Emilia. She might very well be the more mature of the two.”

“I’m still holding a grudge against her for planting the idea in Emilia-tan’s head that babies are made by kissing.”

As the victim of that childish, adorable, and tragic misunderstanding, he absolutely would never forget.

“

all functionality, and there was no way Subaru would ever meet her again. Besides—

"So the woman inside the coffin was your goal. There's that cursed seal, too. You…"

"—My objective was to be reunited with Teacher, young Subaru. However, please do not misunderstand."

"Misunderstand what? You and Beatrice… You met her… You met Echidna. Now you can…"

"What I desire is a reunion with blood flowing through her, a soul resting in her—a living, breathing Teacher. It is all I desire. It is my greatest wish, and I cannot relinquish it."

Subaru blinked hard not only at Roswaal's dreamlike speech but also at the content of his words.

"But that means…bringing her back from the dead. Do you have a…way to do that?"

"No, not a theory that would work upon ordinary souls. But because this is Teacher, a way remains. The liberation of the Sanctuary…the recovery of her remains…these are but preliminary steps."

So that was why he wanted the Sanctuary liberated. Roswaal had achieved his own objective.

But as for a method to revive the dead, and one that would work only upon the Witch in the coffin…

"So as to not give rise to misunderstandings, I wish to be clear about this one thing, young Subaru."

"…Say it."

"The book of knowledge has burned to ash, denying me my promised future. As I am bound by the cursed seal, I cannot continue any of the machinations I have attempted to date—however, I have no intention of giving up on Teacher because of this."

Tilting his glass to his lips, Roswaal spoke those implacable words without crossing gazes. It was more than enough to send a shiver of fear through Subaru, supposedly in an advantageous position now that Roswaal had given up on his secret plotting.

"I really don't mind you not giving up… Er, this might be gutsy to say to someone like you, but just do whatever you like. Thing is, what can you do to make that goal come true?"

"It is a simple matter—I shall continue watching over you."

"

—He'd keep watching.

This ominous phrase left Subaru at a loss for words. Roswaal turned and faced Subaru with his differently colored eyes—and with the same fire burning in both, he continued:

"Fortunately, your goal of placing Lady Emilia on the royal throne aligns your objective with mine. And so we shall continue our relationship as coconspirators just as before… It is merely that, just as before, I pity you for remaining unchanged."

"What the hell?"

Subaru raised his eyebrows, unable to easily dismiss the word *pity*. His reaction made Roswaal pull back his shoulders. He'd deciphered the emotions resting in Roswaal's eyes—sympathy and compassion.

"You should have known loss. You should have felt loss so great that you would have become a Sage who would doggedly protect only that most precious to him—in my own way, I wanted to save you."

"What the hell's wise about that? What does simply accepting loss get you?!"

"You, who have rejected loss and have decided to carry everything in your arms, will continue to suffer. You will experience wounds that can never be undone, experience loss over and over, and you will rise up for the sake of regaining what you have lost, continuing to add to your invisible injuries. That is simply…too cruel."

"—!"

Roswaal's words carried too much weight to dismiss without a second thought, because the man knew. Even if he didn't know it was through Return by Death, Roswaal knew Subaru repeated events. Accordingly, he was the only one who could realistically imagine just what a road of thorns Subaru walked.

"And now that you have rejected the path of the Sage and chosen the path of the Fool, I will never allow you to compromise. Is this not natural? It is you who wished for this."

With Subaru unable to speak a word, Roswaal took a step forward, closing the distance between them. Then, reaching out with a hand, he grasped Subaru's shoulder, gently pulled his face close, and whispered into Subaru's ear.

"—Hereafter, if you lose someone around you who you should have protected, I will swiftly burn the remaining others away

without hesitation and, with the cursed seal, become ash myself."

"—?!"

"You have decided to shoulder all. You must not abandon anything. I will not allow a lost world to continue into the future. I reject your compromise—now that I have lost the book of knowledge, I have only you to guide me to Teacher, young Subaru. You and the path you walk."

Pulling his face away, Roswaal gave Subaru's chest a light shove. Even though it had little strength behind it, Subaru wobbled as if he had been thrust away, grabbing hold of the railing to support his body.

—This was Roswaal L. Mathers, the man who lived for a wish that was four hundred years old.

He would never seek to inflict undesired suffering upon Subaru and Emilia again. If Subaru wished it, he would no doubt cooperate to work toward Subaru's objectives, even lending Emilia a hand with his full strength.

But if Subaru miscalculated even slightly, Roswaal would flip the table over, rendering everything futile.

This was no lie or deception. Roswaal absolutely would do it for the sake of his greatest desire.

"My, there is no need to be so frightened. So long as you remain true to yourself and continue in your duty, I shall cooperate with you fully—this is simply the new pact between you and I."

"…I've learned that for pacts, you have to check not just the fine print but the guy you're signing it with, too."

Subaru's sarcasm and anguished sigh made Roswaal widen his eyes. Immediately after, he put his hand to his mouth as he began to laugh. He laughed for a while before saying, "Ah, yes," and lifting his face. "I only just said I would cooperate in full, so there is something of which I must properly inform you."

"You're still holding on to secrets to shake me up?"

"In the royal capital and this time, that makes it twice that I have hired the Bowel Hunter. But the girl in bonds underground… this Beast Master, I had nothing to do with either of her attacks."

"—Huh?"

Subaru, on guard for what more might come, could only drop his mouth wide open.

The girl held in bonds underground meant Meili, captured at the mansion and kept prisoner since. At present, the death of her

partner in crime, Elsa, had left her too uncooperative to deal with in any other fashion.

That had hurt his head enough, but Roswaal's next words were a thunderclap out of the clear blue sky.

"This time, my contract only targeted Beatrice. In accordance with the book of knowledge, I was to liberate that girl from her twisted fate… But if I heard correctly, those girls had plans that went beyond my request, did they not?"

"Yeah, Elsa and Meili were part of the same group, I figure, so Meili was helping her out with her contract. Because if that wasn't the case, who could've tipped them off about the mansion's interior like that…?"

"—In other words, there was another culprit who planned this attack on the mansion besides meeee."

"

This time, I'm just drunk on the atmosphere."

"So you really are drunk."

Emilia shot Subaru a smile as she leaned on the handrail right beside Subaru. The white flesh poking out from her pure ceremonial garment, the nape of her neck, and her cheeks were ever so slightly reddened as she made a small, amused-looking smile.

"I've been looking for you this whole time… Where did you run off to, Subaru?"

"Setting aside the location, event-wise, it sure felt like a long, drawn-out battle against the final boss. Somehow, I got through it, but I feel like it shaved years off my life span. Emilia-tan, will you console me?"

"Yes, yes. Today, Subaru is drunk on the mood as well as himself."

Mysteriously, he returned to his normal state after talking with Emilia. Now that he was freed from the weighty mental state left by his exchange with Roswaal, the feeling of exhilaration over the ceremony came rushing right back. Setting that aside, standing in front of Emilia was making him feel awkward, so Subaru put his glass to his lips to conceal his blush.

"By the way, did you manage to make up with Roswaal?"

"*Geh! Ack!* Th-that's one hell of a timely question…!"

"From the looks of it, Roswaal really teased you quite a bit."

She touched a sore point for him. Her use of the word *teased* was so cute that it bothered him somewhat, but Subaru made no effort to refute the point. "A bit, yeah," he straight-up admitted with a nod. "After all that, it almost feels like nothing changed from before…or if anything, it got even worse."

"Roswaal's probably afraid of everyone forgetting what he's done. That's why he's doing that to draw everyone's attention to himself. He's *really* childish deep down, you know."

Subaru was taken back by how Emilia put her hands on her hips, speaking those words with the faintest hint of anger.

He was not taken back by her cuteness—it was because Subaru, too, believed this was the truth.

The instant he had the thought, his interpretation of Roswaal's earlier admonition changed considerably.

"…You're really something, Emilia-tan."

"Is that so? Tee-hee, thank you. I think Subaru's *really* something, too."

“Hmm, I wonder.”

“Yes, you are! Goodness, Subaru… Hey, look over there.”

Emilia irritably walked over to Subaru, whose face showed scant appreciation for everything he’d done, and then she spread both arms wide to indicate the scene in the great hall.

—Inside were all their companions and the visible result of Subaru’s, Emilia’s, and everyone else’s efforts.

“Everyone’s having fun, aren’t they?”

“…I suppose you’re right. It’s like an at-home banquet, kind of the ideal for my small-time, common-man sensibilities.”

“Mm, I think so, too. This is a *really* nice scene.”

Her violet eyes contained affection and envy in equal measure. Glancing at them from the side made Subaru’s heart tremble.

—This was the scene Emilia had wanted to see. In a broader sense, this was the ideal she was seeking to make a reality.

The atmosphere offered tranquility for nobles, merchants, commoners, humans, demi-humans, and mixed-blood people, without any discrimination of social standing or race.

“—Subaru, you’re making a *really* gentle face.”

“Guess that figures. I think I’m just happy watching the same scene as Emilia-tan and also thinking how nice everything is.”

“Ahhh, I get it. I’m happy Subaru feels the same way I do, too.”

“Hmm, I wonder. I might disagree with you on that. Sometimes, it’s fine to be different.”

Even though they were looking at the same thing and sharing the same feelings of happiness, they were still looking at the scene before them two different ways.

It wasn’t necessary for lovers to be the same in anything and everything. The thought he had that moment was, *It’s fine to be different.*

“

The words Emilia spoke in a show of courage left Subaru shrugging and flashing a smile back at her. Emilia breathed out in relief, gently offering him the pinkie finger of her right hand.

"It's a promise, then. You did this with Petra. This is a tradition from Subaru's homeland, yes?"

"Ohhh, it sure is. What sharp eyes you have. Break this promise, and your meals will be needles for breakfast, lunch, and supper."

"Oh no, so scary… You better keep this promise, then."

Nervously, Emilia wrapped her slender finger around Subaru's right pinkie.

"When the celebration is over, let's have an important talk in my room. Don't break our promise this time, okay?"

"I'm a serial promise-breaker and all, but is it even an option to not keep my word to go to Emilia-tan's room at night after I've been summoned? I'm thinking no."

"I'm sorry—I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

The two engaged in such typical banter as they formed that promise between them. Missing the touch of their joined pinkies as they parted, Subaru went, "Now, then," as he winked. "I'll have fun finding out what this talk's all about."

"…I need to talk to you about…me. One night might not even be enough to finish."

"If it's that important, I'll be with you as many nights as it takes. I'm your one and only knight, okay?"

"O-okay."

She did her best to mimic Subaru's usual jesting tone. Emilia's nervous behavior reflected her underlying concern. She felt uneasy talking about herself.

If this was connected to the past she saw in the Trial, Subaru could understand her unease. He understood, but he wanted to tell her it was an unnecessary concern nonetheless.

"It's all right, Emilia-tan. No matter what happens, you'll never disappoint me."

"Subaru…"

"It's just like I told you at the tomb. I love you, so everything'll be okay. That's all there is to it."

No matter what she'd tell him, no matter what it triggered, nothing would change.

"—What's important isn't where you start or what happens midway

but how it ends.”

Led to his parents and the thoughts they’d conveyed to him, this was the answer he’d arrived at in the tomb.

—He really couldn’t hold a candle to his mom. Or his dad, either, for that matter.

“Besides, even if there are issues, it’s not like it’s a big deal now, right?”

“…How can you tell?”

“It was the way you looked at the great hall with gentle eyes just now. I can already tell from that.”

The scene spread forth in the great hall of Miload Manor was one without discrimination between human and demi-human, noble and commoner. When Subaru called that his ideal, Emilia accepted it with a look of longing.

Whatever ideals might be raised high in Emilia’s heart, Subaru had no doubt he could believe in them.

“If you want to make this happen everywhere, I’ll help. I think this is a good cause. If that scene becomes a part of why Emilia-tan always works so hard, then I’ll be first in line to help you.”

“Subaru, can I…really depend on you?”

“What do you think that oath I swore to you earlier was all about? Go and depend on me before anyone else. I’ll do anything I can do to help, and if I don’t understand something, we’ll think about it together.”

“

Frederica, and Ryuzu, but that was another story.

Either way, to Subaru, the pie formed by those familial bonds was exquisite.

"Oh. Subaru, if you eat it so fast, you're going to choke on it."

"Well. I'm hungry. I'll savor the taste more if Emilia-tan says *aah* for me, though."

"I feel like I've done that before when Subaru was all tired…"

Emilia wore a slight, strained smile as she replied.

"Now then," said Subaru, leading her by the hand toward the great hall.

As she was led by the hand, Emilia looked up at the sky but once. Then she smiled and let Subaru escort her, entering the hall at his side.

The pair's return in the middle of the banquet only served to heighten the excitement.

Maybe Otto had imbibed too much; his clothes were all disheveled as he stumbled around in a drunken stupor. Garfiel was right there with Otto, but when he tried to bring alcohol to his mouth, he received a lecture from Frederica about it.

Petra and Beatrice had reached the climax of their disparate dancing. Petra had sweat on her brow as she smiled like a flower; Beatrice was putting on quite a passionate performance of her own in her desperation to not be beaten.

Ryuzu and Roswaal sat beside each other, lightly tapping their glasses together and exchanging words a little here and there, like old acquaintances rekindling their relationship.

Subaru spotted Ram nearby, watching the scene from a distance, her lips relaxing in apparent relief. Instead of staying at Roswaal's side, she stood by the younger sister she had lost all memory of and yet still felt a tangible, lingering bond between them. It was almost like she knew Rem would have wanted her to be close.

Others partaking in the festivities included various associates of the Miload family. Numerous demi-human servants busily hurried about, while their mistress, the young lady of the household, was venting in annoyance at a rather courteous butler.

Later, Subaru would have to celebrate that special night with his favorite dragon, waiting patiently for him outside the manor.

—It was with various such thoughts that he spent the evening of festivities with everyone.

“It’s a really nice atmosphere, Emilia-tan.”

“Yes. This really does represent everything I’m trying to achieve. I’ll never forget this.”

They began by entering the great hall at the most prominent place, suddenly joining the two dancing girls.

They didn’t know the first thing about dancing, but the feelings of enjoyment would probably be the same regardless.

Even if the steps were haphazard and offbeat.

The knight and the witch—now officially master and servant—stepped forward amid a mix of bewilderment and laughter.

ADDENDUM

—THE RETURN

—In a dark, cold, and indistinct space, the soft patter of bare feet continued to echo at regular intervals.

In that lightless world, that space with nothing but unfathomable darkness spreading forth, the source of those footsteps had arrived without ever going astray. The trip had been made with the ease of someone walking into their own bedroom.

The sound of dripping water, the cries of insects crawling about, the sensation of mud and gravel beneath the soles of her bare feet—she pushed past them all.

Finally, she arrived at the deepest reaches of that darkness. She stretched out a hand and stroked a mossy, slippery wall.

Instantly, faint lights floated up and danced around her as a lukewarm wind blew through the wall. Her long pink hair and white cloak flapped in that wind. The hovering pinpricks of light circled around her as she slowly passed through the barrier.

"So the reactivation ritual has remained intact."

The figure—no, the girl—murmured offhandedly as she slipped outside. The next instant, a dazzling shaft of light made her close her eyes. After walking through the darkness underground, the sunrays outside were like daggers to her eyes. She blinked several times before she could see the world anew.

—In the sky taller than the trees of the forest, she saw the sun had only just begun to rise.

"…Surprisingly, I am unmoved."

With the sunlight striking her eyes, the girl seemed disappointed as she tilted her head.

Just as she had said, there was no surge of emotion visible within her impassive eyes. She'd expected something from seeing

the real sun after gazing upon a false one for so long, but it didn't affect her as much as she'd thought it would.

All that said, she was free to applaud the trick she had played, the performance she had delivered. She felt a sense of accomplishment. She'd recovered the magic crystal she'd had her eye on from the very beginning, and for the moment, she had nothing to be concerned of while wandering about.

"My only regret is that since I was forced to borrow that thing's help, I was unable to see her crushed by the Trial…but she did lift the barrier. I suppose I shall chalk it up as breaking even."

Had it not been for that, she—no, the vessel—would never have been able to venture out from the Sanctuary.

She had been in a veritable deadlock, drowning in the cleverness of her own scheme. Atypically, thinking of the girl who'd freed her from that situation made her chest overflow with emotions that were difficult to put into words.

"…Well, I don't really mind. I really can't overwork this body, and I'd anticipated having to walk around for a while to fill in all the blanks. There's no need to obsess over such things…for now."

The girl opened and closed her hands to check on the condition of her body.

This was the result of repeatedly exerting herself on the replica, who had a soul identical in nature to the girl whose body had become the core of the barrier. She'd grafted a piece of her soul inside the replica who had once entered the tomb, taking over bit by tiny bit.

Revival by attaching a soul to the body of another—strictly speaking, this differed from reviving the dead, but it was unquestionably similar, rough around the edges as it might be. It would take time to become fully accustomed to the body, but there was no way around that.

Surely, it was a time to be grateful that she could walk around with her old soul and her new body at all.

"As for a name…it has been so long. Perhaps, in accordance with his knowledge, I should call myself Omega?"

The word bore the meaning of "the end." Given her current situation, there was no name more fitting.

The girl relaxed her lips as she stepped onto grass, slipping through gaps between the trees and emerging from the forest.

An ever-so-slight discomfort could be detected in her gait, but it

was nothing truly significant. Fatigue and pain merely meant body and soul were well and truly connected. She could not help but enjoy the feeling of being alive after so long.

“Beatrice has parted ways with the archive of forbidden books. Roswaal has lost his guiding light. But that young man pulled something from the embers, and Garf… Garfiel, with all that anger stored up inside, is a pile of smoldering coals indeed. From the shadows, I suppose I should watch over their valiant exploits as they face him under the light of day.”

The girl intentionally avoided commenting on her slight mental slip as she walked forth.

A world was waiting for her—a world where nothing was faded and muted, a mountain filled with treasure to satisfy her inexhaustible greed for knowledge.

“And as I go, perhaps the day will come when I finally understand?”

The girl smiled as she gazed at a single flower along the road.

Plucking one of its petals with her fingers, she breathed in its scent and subsequently tossed it into her mouth.

The flower, so proudly displaying its beauty to the world, would someday wither. Why did flowers wither?

Why did beautiful memories shared by people grow faint one day?

“—Ahhh, why does love fade so…?”

The girl walked forward, her long pink hair swaying as she murmured to herself.

The Witch had been released unto the world once more.

< END >

AFTERWORD

Hey there, it's Tappei Nagatsuki! The notorious Mouse-Colored Cat! Sorry for the possibly smaller font size!

As you probably know already, this has been going on since way back in Volume 12! However, I think this volume will see the end of it. Probably? Maybe?

Anyway, thank you very much for purchasing Volume 15. Having arrived at the afterword, you are almost certainly already aware of this, but Volume 15 concludes Arc 4 of *Re:ZERO*!

The book ended up a little longer than originally planned, but as a crucial chapter in how the main character's party becomes a group united with a single heart and soul, I have no complaints so long as you've had fun with it up to this point.

The next volume begins the next leg of the story, plunging us directly into Arc 5. There'll be appearances by characters who haven't been in the limelight for a while, so by all means, I hope you enjoy the next arc, too!

And this time, some people might have already read this in the afterword, but for everyone else, the third short-story compilation of *Re:ZERO* is going on sale this month, too. I hope they're a lot of fun combined, giving you a good warmhurry (heartwarming short stories and hurried main story) experience!

Also, I'm pretty sure that the third short-story compilation goes into information about recent events that weren't possible here, so for those who think, *Books are fun, afterwords included!* please try that on for size as well.

Now, as you can see, I am pushing the character limit, so I shall move on to customary words of thanks.

To Editor I, we've finally finished our sprint through Arc 4 in one piece. This one probably had the most difficult-to-manage structural complexity of them all! Publishing this whole thing in a year and change feels like a year earlier than I expected! Thank you very much!

To Otsuka, my dear illustrator, Arc 4 basically featured just as many new characters as Arc 3 did. Truly, thank you very much for delivering me one character design after another. The one you handed me at the very, very end showing Beatrice's smiling face after she'd been saved… Best cover illustration ever! Thank you so much!

To Kusano, the designer, I say this every time, but it's no exaggeration to say you displayed amazing skill in showing off the heroines as this arc came to a close. Thank you very much for your work on this volume as well!

Also, let me thank Matsuse and Fugetsu for illustrating the world of *Re:ZERO*, with particular appreciation for Fugetsu and her magnificent conclusion to the comic version of Arc 2! Truly, thank you very much! Since I owe you for the third short-story compilation going on sale this month, too, my words almost feel too meager to properly convey how I feel, but thank you very much!

To the others, such as everyone at MF Bunko J's editorial department, all the reviewers, bookstores, and sales staff: It's thanks to how you all took care of me during this sprint that I somehow made it to the completion of Arc 4. You've been a huge help!

Finally, my greatest of thanks goes out to all you readers, who've been cheering me on this whole time.

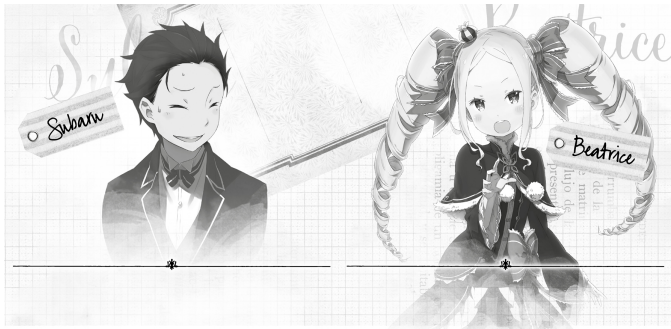
In a certain sense, part one of the story is complete! That said, thank you for sticking with me all the way to the end of Arc 4. *Re:ZERO* will be continuing for quite some time to come, so I hope you enjoy it!

Well then, let's meet again for a fresh start in Volume 16. The royal-selection candidates assemble once more!

November 2017

<<Filled with a sense of liberation and enthusiasm to start anew>>

Adorable Demon-Beast Collection
Guiltylowe
Horn scar
TARGET
2m
75cm
Two-Headed Snake
Rock Piggie
Grass
Horn scar
Weak point, so lighter coloring
Horn
Aaaaah
5m
Black-Winged Mouse
Horn scar
30cm



“Let’s celebrate! Arc 4 is complete! And it’s also the anniversary of my pact with Beako!”

“Goodness… Would you stop prancing around like a child, I wonder? You should behave in a manner more befitting Betty’s contracto… *Uwaah!*”

“Hey, hey, what gives, Beako? Don’t start sulking on me now. That pouty face is a waste of your cute looks… Wait, you’re cute even when you’re sulking!”

“O-of course I am! More importantly, would you put me down, I wonder?! Stop messing around all the time and actually fulfill your duties as a spirit mage!”

“Yeah, yeah, roger that… Wait, by *duties,* do you mean the next-volume preview?! Right, then, everyone gaze in wonder at our picture-perfect teamwork!”

“Are you toying with the readers, I wonder? Anyway, first is an announcement. I suppose the third short-story compilation is going on sale the same month as this book, *Re:ZERO*, Vol. 15.”

“It covers the moments we spent at the mansion before Arc 3… In other words, when Beako was still being crabby toward me. It’s strange looking back on it now, but Beako was cute even when she was being thorny…”

“It’s only natural that Betty is always cute. Also, that is not all that goes on sale that same month. The fifth and final volume of the

comic for Arc 2, the Big Gangan version, is also out, I suppose. Betty gave Subaru her highest recommendation for it, so it is best to pull yourself together and go read it, I suppose."

"And that brings us to Volume 16! It's expected to go on sale in March of 2018. The new arc that starts there is gonna involve me doing all kinds of big stuff as a spirit mage contracted to Beako!"

"That sounds good, but it likely will not go even remotely that smoothly."

"Hey, Beako, you're on my side, right? Can't you put it a little nicer?"

"Does the sight of Subaru getting carried away, failing, and agonizing as a result bother me, I wonder? I suppose Betty has no choice but to assist you. Should you not be grateful, I wonder?"

"Come to think of it, there's talk of an event being planned for next year—a birthday bash for Rem and Ram that's supposed to be super popular. The details are TBA, but a party for those two should be loads of fun!"

"Listen! Would you listen, I wonder?! Betty is speaking about something crucially important right now!"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding, I'm totally listening. Er, well, I'm really glad I can depend on you, Beatrice. If it wasn't for you, I'd just be good-for-nothing garbage, you know."

"Goodness. Why must Betty go to such lengths for good-for-nothing, useless garbage like Subaru, I wonder? Do not forget to thank Betty for all this after the fact as well."

"Yeah, leave that to me. No way I'll forget to give you gratitude and love for years to come!"

"Did Betty speak even one word about love, I wonder?! …But if it comes to that…I shall accept."

"Beako, you really are cuuute!"

"Gaaah! Will you ever stop, I wonder?!"

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